

## The Visitors' Register, Re-Visited

As I worked on my paper for last year's anniversary dinner, I came across a reference in the Club minutes that intrigued me. At a club meeting in 1919, a motion was made and approved to have the club historian annually read a paper written by a long deceased member as a way of connecting the then present membership to those worthies of the past. Let me note at this point that the paper was to be presented on the "Historian's Evening," when he was not just the front man for the annual president's address. The Board of Management may wish to re-visit this arrangement.

Tonight I wish to recognize that long ago motion and what better way than to honor the historian in question, Robert Ralston Jones. Although little remembered today, Jones was an engineer of considerable note. Born in upstate New York in 1850, he served more than 30 years as the chief assistant engineer in the Cincinnati District. As the highest ranking civilian in this federal agency, he supervised the surveying for, as well as the design and construction of, much of the original lock and dam system on the Ohio River. In addition, his interest in history led to the 1902 publication of a history of Fort Washington in which he showed the original location of the fort, and which led to the placement of the historical marker that rests on the edge of the old Guilford School property across the street from where we sit.

In addition to being a past president of our club, Jones was active in numerous local organizations, including the Society of Colonial Wars, the Sons of the Revolution, and the *Alliance Francais*. For our purposes, however, Jones presented several interesting papers on Historian's Evenings, but since I am circumscribed by a time limit, all of these proved much too

long. What I have done is to take one of Jones' shorter contributions, delivered as part of a budget at the Club's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1924. Jones titled it, simply, "The Visitors' Register."

Since several members this evening are already in advanced stages of inebriation, and we still have President Murphy's address to follow, I have chosen to eliminate several inconsequential parts of Jones' paper without, I think, losing anything of substance. A word of caution: This paper involves several time changes. I comment in the present tense; Jones, of course, was writing in 1924; and he quotes several people from earlier years, as do I. So . . . pay attention!

Now, here's Robert Ralston Jones:

Those of us who had the good fortune to be present at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Literary Club in 1899 may recall the beautiful address of Ainsworth Rand Spofford, the spiritual Father of this Club. After describing early Club life, with its lively but innocent recreations, including the visit of Ralph Waldo Emerson during the first fiscal year of the Club's existence, he concluded with the following sentiment: "The Cincinnati Literary Club, may it flourish in immortal youth, celebrating its centennials and semi-centennials to the last syllable of recorded time."

That was twenty-five years ago; we have, and we say it with all humility, kept the faith committed unto us. We have preserved or tried to preserve the honored traditions of the Club amid the kaleidoscope changes of a world run mad for wealth, for selfish ambition and false glory."

At this time I will refrain from making any comments about our current situation. Now, back to

Mr. Jones:

The fame of the Literary Club has gone abroad and to our foyer visitors have come from all quarters of the earth. The names of many of these visitors are inscribed on the pages of this book. It is a modest volume, its leather binding now a little foxed and its one time virgin pages a little soiled by the handling of many years. Prior to the use of this register, the names of visitors are mentioned only in the minutes of the Club.

The first entry in the register is dated June 21, 1879; it gives the name Howard C. Hollister, late Judge of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio. Mr. Hollister was introduced . . . by William Howard Taft, later nineteenth president of the United States and now Chief Justice.

Incidentally, however persuasive Taft may have been, I wish to point out, Hollister resisted the lure of club membership for another 22 years.

Again, Jones:

Time permits of a hasty resumé only, of a few of the many names recorded on the pages of the register. Our visitors have come from all countries and climes, Bombay, Rome and Calcutta touch elbows with Buenos Aires; London and Paris and Berlin are in a harmony on these pages which at present they are far from enjoying in actual life; New York and Glasgow and St. Petersburg and Dublin; New Castle in England and New Orleans in America; Hartford, Connecticut and Zurich, Switzerland; Lubec and Chicago, San Francisco and Dresden and Montreal and Yeddo, Japan; why, the pages of our register carry us round the world more swiftly than the enchanted carpet of "The Thief of Bagdad." Moncure Daniel Conway—then of London—visited the Club on October 2, 1880. Twenty-three years before [that would be 1857] he had been elected a member and this is how he speaks of it in his autobiography:

"Cincinnati was the most cultivated of the Western cities. There was an admirable Literary Club, which met every week to converse and regale itself with squibs, recitations, cigars and Catawba wine. To it belonged young men who afterwards became prominent figures in the world: Rutherford Hayes, President of the United States; Edward Noyes, a distinguished general and Minister to France; A. R. Spofford, Librarian of Congress; Judge Stallo, Minister to Italy; Judge James, Judge Manning Force, and others."

Now, again, we return to Mr. Jones. "Apropos of the recent visit of the Prince of Wales to New York and Chicago," [That would be the future Edward VIII and husband of Wallace Simpson]

Jones further quotes Moncure Conway's description of an earlier Prince of Wales' 1859 visit to Cincinnati:

"Society in Cincinnati was gay. There were picnics, dances, charade acting, tableaux. The masquerade balls were as brilliant as those of

Europe. The city was celebrated for its beautiful ladies and they knew how to dress well. When the young prince, now King Edward VII, was visiting American cities, it was announced that he would dance only with ladies selected for him. In Cincinnati, the committee decided that at the ball in Pike's Opera House, partners for the prince should be selected with reference to their beauty. This, of course, was fatal to the committee men who in a city of over 200,000, had to decide which were the eight or ten most beautiful ladies. My bride and I danced in one of the stage quadrilles near him, and I remarked the pleasure with which he looked on the vast array of beauties."

The prince's later reputation for lechery should have given Conway pause for concern!

Now, back to Mr. Jones.

Albion W. Tourgee visited our Club in the spring of 1882. He is said to have been born of Huguenot stock . . . in Clermont County. A soldier of the Civil War and after that a newspaper writer, a judge in North Carolina during the Reconstruction Period, and a writer of note in his day, Mr. Tourgee made many friends and many bitter enemies. His judicial district was a stronghold for the Ku-Klux-Klan of that day, which it was said planned the assassination of the judge. Many of us recall the striking titles of some of his books bearing on the political situation in the South, among these were "Figs and Thistles," "Bricks without Straw," and "Hot Ploughshares." About three years before his visit to the Literary Club, Mr. Tourgee had published what was, perhaps, his best seller, with the title, "A Fool's Errand by One of the Fools." The sponsor of Mr. Tourgee was our dear blind Judge Moses Wilson.

From Tourgee Jones moved on to Oscar Wilde's visit.

Oscar Wilde, a native of Dublin, had been a student at Trinity College, Dublin, and later was graduated from Magdalen College, Oxford. At the time of his visit to the Literary Club, Wilde was 26 years of age and had published his book of poems the year before. While an undergraduate and after leaving college, he had posed as the apostle of aestheticism in manner, costume, and literature. The disgrace which overwhelmed his later life caused the death of Oscar Wilde at the age of 44.

Although Jones had no more to say about Oscar Wilde, I do. The Irish poet and future playwright had come to the United States that year to promote the Gilbert & Sullivan opera "Patience," which featured a character loosely based on himself. Traversing the country, he

stopped in Cincinnati both on his way out to San Francisco and on his return. Interviewed by the local press, however, he found little to admire in our city . . . and failed to mention this club.

Another writer who visited our club about that time was not as flamboyant. George Washington Cable had just recently published the novel, *Doctor Sevier*, and Robert Ralston Jones praised that book as “a story of such pathos and unobtrusive beauty that it is likely to live after others of his pen pictures have been perhaps forgotten.” Alas, no such luck for Mr. Cable or his book.

Jones went on to describe Cable:

[He] was a man of 44 and at the height of his popularity as a lecturer and reader of his own works. His personality was a quasi -double one, with a Virginia father and a New England mother. His early life had been a hard one--a boy soldier in the Confederate army, wounded in battle, an errand boy in New Orleans, and a writer for the *Picayune* under the pseudonym of “Drop Shot.” Mr. Cable’s gifts were varied and he sometimes gave a touch of vividness to his pictures of Creole life by singing the wild yet plaintive melodies of the French-speaking negroes of Louisiana.

After dispatching George Washington Cable, Jones turned to one of our most illustrious guests, who had visited on the same evening.

The name “S. L. Clemens, Hartford, Connecticut,” is inscribed in the Visitors Register in 1885, the year in which “Huckleberry Finn was given to the world. The Clemens family had emigrated from Tennessee to the little hamlet of Florida, Missouri, where Sam was born. The boy attended school in the town of Hannibal. The famous cave mentioned in “Tom Sawyer” was located in one of the hills adjoining Hannibal, for it was a real not a legendary cave. Mark Twain’s schooling ended when he turned 16, for then it was that he became a “cub pilot” on the Mississippi River. After this, his life in Nevada, California, and the Hawaiian Islands served to develop the quaint humor natural to the Clemens family . . . .

That same year, 1885, the club “entertained a musical genius . . . in the person of Walter Johannes Damrosch,” so continued Jones.

As an interpreter of Wagner, Rubenstein, Verdi, and other composers, Damrosch had perhaps no superior. In the year of his visit to the Literary Club he had succeeded his father Leopold as the conductor of the Oratorio and Symphony Societies and the Metropolitan Opera, all of New York. As a composer, he wrote "The Scarlet Letter," "Cyrano," "The Manilla Te Deum," and other lesser compositions.

Two years later, Henry Howe, historian, antiquarian and former club member, attended a meeting.

"His name is written in microscopic letters," wrote Jones, "followed by a note in his own diminutive handwriting. 'I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, Oct. 11, 1816,'" scribbled Howe, "came to Cincinnati in 1847, here thirty years and now residing in Columbus and write this without glasses. Long live this dear old Club.' "

The following year, another former member, Henry Blackwell, paid a visit. While not a founder, he had joined the club in its first year. Although virtually unknown today, he is perhaps better identified as the husband of woman's rights activist Lucy Stone and brother of Elizabeth Blackwell, the nation's first female physician. Perhaps in deference to our club's membership policies, Jones neglected to mention either of these two connections.

Of greater interest to Jones was the November evening in 1894 that Joseph Jefferson, famous for his stage portrayal of Rip Van Winkle, came to the Club. "He has left in our Visitors' book," Jones wrote, "the modest autograph, 'J. Jefferson, Buzzard's Bay, Mass.' This was before the dark days of prohibition," he continued,

and a bottle of the very best whiskey was especially procured for the entertainment of the Club's distinguished guest. Prior to this time the liquid refreshments of the Club had been limited to beer and sour wine. At the time of Mr. Jefferson's first visit to us, the Literary Club was occupying its old quarters on Fourth Street, but some years later, after we were installed in our present home [meaning the building

on Eighth Street], Mr. Jefferson came to us again. This time, as we recall, he gave us a pleasant informal talk on matters connected with the stage and incidentally the mannerisms of actors. At the time of his last visit Mr. Jefferson was one of the veterans of the stage, for he began to become famous as Asa Trenchard in "American Cousin" as early as 1858; indeed, Jefferson made his stage debut as a three year old child in 1832.

While Mr. Jefferson would, perhaps, prefer to be associated with the play of "The Rivals" or "Cricket on the Hearth," most of the now old boys of the Literary Club will cherish his memory as Rip Van Winkle, the amiable vagabond of the Catskills; indeed this seems to have been the verdict of our English cousins for this play ran in London for 150 nights. In private life, as we saw him at the Literary Club, Joe Jefferson was a very modest gentleman who preferred to talk of his painting and his angling adventures rather than discourse on the stage.

Leaving Jefferson behind, Robert Ralston Jones then shifted his attention to a guest with a more serious background.

Three years before his appointment as Ambassador to England and only four years before the bursting of war clouds over Europe, Walter Hines Page made a quiet visit in 1910. He was then a member of the publishing firm of Doubleday, Page and Company of New York, and the editor of the magazine, "World's Work."

Jones paid him great homage.

As our representative at the Court of Saint James during the Great War, Mr. Page gained the respect and admiration of every patriotic American. With infinite tact and patience, he endured a position which at times was most galling to a man of high spirit. But Page was rewarded for his long waiting, when his country at last girded on the sword of righteous wrath, and the first handful of United States soldiers marched through the streets of London to be welcomed with enthusiastic applause . . . . But Page did not long survive his trying experiences abroad, returning to his native land, broken in health and soon to die, but happy in the feeling that he no longer needed to apologize for the great flag which he represented.

But now as we lay the old "Visitor's Register" on its shelf, to accumulate autographs for another quarter century, we do it with the consciousness that for many of the present club members this is the last great anniversary.

And then Jones concluded, as one who had been a member since 1899, with a charge to those who had joined the club in more recent years: "Now must we commit to our younger members

the honor and hallowed traditions of our Club. 'tis they who must 'carry on' to the Centennial Anniversary. To them we bequeath this solemn duty, with love for our past, faith in the present and no misgivings for the years to come."

On behalf of Robert Ralston Jones, I thank you.

Robert C. Vitz

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