

PRESIDENT'S ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS

Prepared for the Literary Club of Cincinnati
by Jerry Kathman
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Gentlemen in
Frock Coat in 1913,
Gentleman's Gazette.



Good evening, gentlemen. I think we would mostly agree that every time we walk into this clubhouse, we can expect a good evening. It is the third word of my greeting that I choose to focus on this evening—gentlemen.

I have been assured by my predecessors that it is my prerogative as

president to ramble on aimlessly at our anniversary observance about a topic of my choosing. So gentlemen it is. For knowing that when we walk into this clubhouse we are in the company of gentlemen is perhaps the best reason why we dress up on Monday evenings. And occasionally we hear a good paper.

It is an increasingly curious word, this word, “gentleman.” Arriving at a meaningful definition of this word in 2018 is not the simple task it might have been in earlier times.

My first encounter with this term—at least where I was the intended target—was perhaps, for me, formative. I was a freshman in high school attending my first physical education class. We were a rather pathetic assemblage of scrawny

13-year-old boys—all boys. God only knows what forms of torture our instructor had in store for us in the months ahead. I was full of dread.

This guy was straight out of central casting, with a thick neck and a buzz cut. I suspect he was in possession of a vocabulary of about 200 words. With a deep and thunderous voice, he said “Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

It was at once terrifying and weird. We were pubescent boys. We were not prepared to think of ourselves as men, much less gentlemen. Nor did I feel he was honoring us with this choice of words. It was intimidating, unsettling and confusing. I suspect it was his way of establishing dominance.

For the next four years at my West-Side Catholic boys school, I came to hear that term regularly. I don't think it was ever served up as a sign of respect. I remain convinced that it was something else—perhaps a technique to control a gathering of potentially unruly boys. Who knows? My only point is that my first encounter with this word was not positive. It felt like a pejorative.

I leap ahead six years from those early days of high school. By then, I found myself in very different circumstances. I was alone, living in London, an intern working for a design consultancy. I discovered a very different culture, born of very different mores and implied social contracts. It was a world away from the working-class parishes of my West-Side Cincinnati—my roots. I was not prepared for this, but I was instantly smitten.

Thus began what I can claim now is a lifetime of Anglophilia. I completely embraced as superior, British sensibilities concerning language and manners. And without consciously knowing it, I began feeding a desire to behave towards others

in the ways I witnessed in London. One might suggest I was adopting the style of a gentleman. At least to the degree I was capable of doing so.



Jerry in London
during his internship.

This style, according to a paper published by Paul Cody of Hartwick College, has nothing to do with social or class designation. Instead there is a moral component inherent in the concept. The code of the gentleman includes gentleness, sympathy, a kind disposition and a fine imagination.

I've since learned that Charles Dickens and Rudyard Kipling, though coming from rather humble origins, desired passionately to be recognized as gentlemen. Mark Twain is certainly an example, from this side of the pond, with the same passionate desire. I am hardly the first working-class stiff seduced by the ways of my betters.

I move ahead in time once again, to the more recent past. It was a spring evening about ten years ago, when Robert Smith first invited me into this clubhouse as his guest. I met some of you that evening and have gotten to know many more of you over these years. Though an older man by then and less susceptible to flights of youthful exuberance, I was charmed. I liked the

company I found myself in that night. And I've enjoyed many a Monday night since then.

I've learned since that we have adopted the word "clubbable" to describe the kind of fellow we want to invite to join us. I would suggest, the word "gentleman" still has currency in this clubhouse and remains an apt description of the sort of chap you find within these walls.

We have reached that point in this essay where some definition is required. That attempt at definition will inevitably lead to an examination of some relevant history.

The Oxford dictionary provides a broad sweep of definitions for the word "gentleman."

First, a gentleman is a chivalrous, courteous or honorable man.

Second, a gentleman is a man of good social position, especially one of wealth and leisure.

Third, a man of noble birth, attached to a royal household.

And fourth, simply a polite or formal way of referring to a man.

Well the fourth and bits of the first definition are the only ones that are surviving the rapid and accelerating social changes of the 21st century. A gentleman, most would agree, is a courteous, honorable man.

This meaning has evolved from the Middle English words—"gentle" plus "man," which had earlier been taken from the Old French—gentilz hom. The word "gentle" originally comes from the Latin—gentilis, meaning belonging to the same family, tribe

or race (ouch). By the 13th century, to describe someone as gentle indicated that they belonged to a family of some position.

Historically the word has been a positive appellation, according to the *Etyman*, an etymology and language blog. It notes, however, that the term has been used negatively or sarcastically throughout its history. The devil was sometimes called “the gentleman in black.” A pirate was a “gentleman of fortune” and a highwayman was called a “gentleman of the road.”

The blog finishes with a number of cautions. A “gentleman friend” has a different meaning today—specifically a boyfriend. And if you head out with the lads on Friday night to go to a “gentleman’s club,” you are not likely to encounter someone reading an essay.

Enough of all that. Let’s bring this paper’s focus back into our clubhouse and talk about how this word, “gentlemen,” shows up over the years in our club writings. For we are a group of gentlemen, and my study suggests that we regularly expressed our pleasure in being so.

Robert Newstead stated it this way in his presidential address at the 142nd anniversary dinner in 1991, “We are indeed privileged to be members of this association of our peers and to be the beneficiaries of the many years of camaraderie that have provided us with so many great memories, our hallowed traditions, our intangible esprit de corps, and not the least, our very tangible clubhouse.”

Eslie Asbury, in his presidential address in 1957, stated, “Of course, the real secret of its charm has been that the club has, without guile or over-trying, provided a pleasant male atmosphere for its group of gentlemen whose excuse for an assembly is the hope of a good paper, but each of whom can abide by the rare lesser offering in the anticipation of hearing

his own voice at the refreshment table.” He continues, “For I submit that though we are not merely a gentleman’s club, the literary club members are gentlemen.” He finishes by assuring us, “If, in a rare instance, a self-important, blustery, or supercilious personality has crept in, he has been automatically smitten by the invisible but powerful corrective club atmosphere and has either reformed or withdrawn.”

So there is more to this place than the often-quoted canard that the club is merely a place where one old man tries unsuccessfully each week to keep 40 old men awake for 40 minutes. We know better. We are gentlemen.

Thank you for the privilege you have allowed me this evening—to stand before you and share my thoughts about our beloved club. My investigation also revealed that the commentariat over the years have provided, shall we say, a generous amount of sentimentality in their speeches on these ceremonial occasions. I could have said more about that tonight. But that would have been ungentlemanly.