

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

A Retrospect

An ocean current is a mysterious thing. It is a part of the ocean and yet distinct from it. The particles which compose it may have a little more salt and sparkle and be a little warmer than the general mass, but they are drawn from it and in time return to it unless they evaporate. Their chief distinction is that for a greater or less length of time, they are impelled, by some unseen force, to move together in a given direction, and this joint movement affects certain salutary changes in the particles themselves, in the ocean through which it moves, and in the atmosphere which hovers over it and absorbs its emanations of heat and moisture. The particles themselves may be perpetually changing, but the current is an enduring force in the same general results are produced from age to age with comparatively slight variations.

By a slight stretch of the imagination, the figure can be aptly applied to the Literary Club of Cincinnati. Starting in 1849, the current has moved on with unabated force down to our own time and, notwithstanding the fine recollections of those who think "There are no times like the old times, and the complacency of those who regard the present as the Golden age of the club, it is probably about the same sort of club and has about the same general influence on the individuals who compose it and the society surrounding it, today, that it did forty years ago. In the 42 years of its life the names of 560 individuals have been inscribed on its rolls. Deducting from the total the 86 members who joined, the first year, we find that the annual renewals have averaged just about 12. Last year seventeen new members were elected but this was by no means exceptional. 16 new members were admitted, in 1851 and 16 also in 1871. The percentage of new material to old was much greater, when the club was limited to fifty, sixty, or eighty members, than it is now. Some have staid with us from the beginning and every hair of the heads, that have whitened in our presence is dear to us. Others have signed the Constitution, paid their dues for a season and then disappeared from our circle and their names are almost forgotten.

What induced them to join? Why did they leave? We can only speculate. Many were doubtless attracted by the literary features, pure and simple, but as only 189 out of 369 – who joined the club since 1864 have ever written any thing for the club we must conclude that other motives influenced many. Some doubtless enjoyed hearing what others had to say and write. Some fancied that their social position would be improved or that their professional or political prospects would be promoted by joining it. The fact that the membership has always been strictly limited has enhanced the value of the Fellowship in the eyes of many. Some may have discovered that they could get more eating, drinking and smoking for their money here than elsewhere.

\$20 a year is \$.50 a club night and for that one can get a fair lunch, all the beer and sour wine they can drink and all the cigars he can smoke and a pocket full to last over Sunday. This is not a bad "speck" and one does not have to come for these things you

know, until after the paper has been read. Whatever the motives of those who join, and the discouragement of those who leave, all help to keep the current in motion and the literary element has been large enough at all times to give character and consistency to the club.

The men who join are from all departments of life and are mostly young men of promise. Those who have staid with us long enough to make their presence felt, and generally proved to be men capable of occupying the highest places in their respective callings. What organization, not military ever turned out so large a proportion of brilliant effective army officers? The names of fifty who were members before the war and who achieved high military rank, during the war, may be read on a tablet hanging in the other room. It was a wonderful contribution for so small a club to make to her country's honor and glory.

What organization, not political ever turned out so many prominent public officials? One has been president of the United States; four have been cabinet officers; five United States Senators; twelve members of Congress, eight have been governors of states; six foreign ministers and at least eight consuls. These may be called purely political offices and yet fitness and literary ability have sometimes been considered in filling them. Two have been justices of the US Supreme Court, one of these Chief Justice. One is a US District Judge and one judge of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia. It is entirely the fault of one of our honorary members that we cannot call him United States Circuit Court Judge.

The Supreme Court of Ohio has never seemed a desirable bench for our members. The salary has been too wretchedly small, and the delights of Columbus Society have not been alluring. Three of our members have occupied seats on this bench and but one served out his term. Two members of our club have been induced to become candidates for the Supreme Court this year, with the distinct understanding that they are not to be elected. In the interest of the Ohio State Reports, we hope that one of them may be badly disappointed. Fourteen of our members have been judges have been judges of the Supreme Court; and seventeen, judges of the Court of Common Pleas.

There has not been a time since the war, when we have not had one or more members on each of these benches and never a time when it would not have been better for the bench, if all its members had been taken from our ranks. We now have three candidates for the Court of Common Pleas and no stretch of partisan feeling has enabled any man or newspaper to say they are not the best in the field. One of these men 1600 votes ahead of his party ticket five years ago, and is we hope, good enough to go in, this time, without his parties support.

One of our members is a Circuit Judge. Long may he sit to affirm the decisions of "the literary fellows" and reverse the errors of the rest! Three of our members have been Railroad Presidents. In directions more nearly literary, the prominence of club members has not been less marked. One of the founders has had charge of the Congressional Library, at Washington, for more than 30 years, and five others have been at the head of important public libraries. Two have been college presidents, and thirty five in important classical and professional colleges. Have we had any authors among us? Well, who has

not been an author? Our quips and cranks, our short stories, or political squibs, learned articles, or book reviews and summaries of events, our professional papers etc. are they not read daily in newspapers and magazines by and unsuspecting public? Who would not think we've looked wise if they could see us, or that the articles were worth reading, if our names were attended?

Our contributions appear in every sort of publication, from the Penny Post to the Oencyclopaedia Britannica. A few years since, one of our members contributed an article to the Encyclopaedia Britannica and it doubtless carries great weight since his name was not mentioned. No one in the wide world has ever dared to question its accuracy, except an ex-member of this club, who wrote to the editors a long hysterical statement full of new and curious information which statement in due course of time found its way into the hands of the original contributor and was by him shown to his astonished critic. You cannot get away from the Cincinnati Literary Club even in Europe.

The screeds of one of its members appeared, without his knowledge and consent in Glasgow and Aberdeen papers, Scotland, and came back to him in an unknown tongue from Copenhagen. More wonderful still! The manuscript of a story by one of our members was read by another in Frankfurt-on-the-main, before it was written. But of authors, whose works have put on the garments of muslin and calf and now adorn the shelves of the Congressional Library, and not less than sixty have been enrolled as members of the Literary Club. Nearly all of them know full well, the big end of the horn, where the work goes in, and the small end, where the compensation comes out.

But such is their love for work that several volumes may be accredited to most of them and the whole number of volumes would make a large and rather choice library. 25 of the 60 are authors or editors of legal works, the lawyers taking the lead in this matter as they have in club affairs generally since its organization. Let us turn for a moment to things which belong more strictly to our club life. We are told that in the good old days, "regular debates" were held in the club; that the essay was formally discussed and its positions criticized by members of the club, who sometimes knew more about the subject and the essayist, that the exercises were varied by recitations, declamations and the spinning of yarns. It must be confessed that we do not have such things now, except when the old boys come back to see how we are getting along and to show us how they used to do. When one member put a few pertinent questions to the reader of an essay on "Our Seal Fisheries" a few months ago, they almost seemed impertinent, so completely had the habit of public discussion died out. No one has undertaken to tell us a story from the rostrum since E. S. Throop died and Ozra J Dodds was sent to Washington as the first Congressional Mugwump.

But while we no longer tell stories, we write them and if progress is visible any were it is in the development of the short story and character sketch by a dozen or more of our present members. We very seldom indulge in historical studies or biographical sketches and our professional brethren do not talk "shop" as much as they used to do. Possibly we do not fare as well. The tendency at present is decidedly in the direction of light literature. We seldom review books, but if any author is so [] or peculiar in his style as to attract the attention of our wits, we may look confidently for a clever burlesque or a fun provoking analysis of the peculiarities. The informal continues to be one of the

most useful as well as enjoyable of our club exercises. The budget affords opportunity for comment on current events, outside of the club, for a lively interchange of ideas and, more than this, it furnishes a safety-valve for pent-up feeling and an agency for checking evil tendencies in club manners and literature. Any one is privileged to scold the club on the last Saturday of the month and the medicine is taken without a murmur, especially if it is well spiced.

If, for a long time, the one who comes with a paper has been partially obscured by clouds of tobacco smoke and his voice has been drowned by the rattling of dishes in the clinking of glasses, a mild protest clears up the atmosphere and keeps the supper in the background until the literary part is over. If sincere regret at the loss of valued members has been carried to such an excess that their resignations have been tabled and committees appointed to beg those tendering them to withdraw them, a ray of humor has enabled the club to see and retreat from its false positions.

If the club has been over dosed with tales of travel and especially those in which the thoughts of the traveler were confined to his last meal, or bed, or the next one, to the exclusion of all other subjects, a well-timed burlesque turns the pen of the peripapetic grumblers to more interesting themes. Members of the club now travel more, and talk less about their travels than formerly. If we have had a dismal load of pessimism dumped on our reading desk during the month the chances are strong that the informal will contain a corrective in the shape of some witty argumentum ad absurdum that will cause even the pessimist to a laugh at his folly.

While the articles read at an informal are anonymous only until after the budget is read and no attempt is ever made to conceal authorship, no personal feelings seems to be engendered and the lampooner sits down at the same table with a lampooned the and both enjoy their creature comforts as if nothing had happened.

We might do without a great many things in the literary club, but we could hardly do without our informal. The club as such, has no religious or political creed. It tolerates the discussion of all questions from any standpoint and does not hold itself responsible for the expressed views of anybody. If the mugwump is heard frequently and the Republican or Democrat, hardly ever, it is not because we are all mugwumps, but because we appreciate the fact that this is one of the few places in the city where a mugwump can secure a hearing, while the regular partisan has other fields in which to display his activity. If the man, who has no religious belief or who fancies that his belief is too philosophical to be confirmed by sectarian lines, chooses to state his views, we listen respectfully, but it does not follow that we are all agnostics or theosophists. Our preachers and religious men usually reserve their sermons and professions of faith for the pulpit and prayer meeting. The others are not as fortunate as to have these outlets for their "superstition."

If a fellow member tells us that he does not comprehend how any sane mind can conceive of a Supreme Being, an extreme case perhaps, we do not fly into a passion, although our own sanity is called in question, nor retort, as we might justly, "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God." If he stays with us long he will probably learn that religious people are not the only bigots and that the so-called "liberals" may cultivate

liberality to advantage. If it were otherwise, the club would soon be torn into almost as many fragments as there are members, for no two think alike exactly.

Thus with malice toward none and charity for all, we pursue the even tenor of our way, and each learns something from every other.

W. C. Cochran

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