

The Literary Club as Educator

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President's paper read on occasion of the 155th Anniversary of the Literary Club

25 October 2004

Your **graciousness** in electing me president of this distinguished literary club came as somewhat of a surprise. I like to think that it is for something that I might bring to the office or to have brought to the club over the years. Or maybe just the longevity factor - whatever, I'm grateful.

As I looked over the Vice President's book which gives clues as to the role of the various officers I found Stanley **Dorst's** comment that "the club is an unusual organization, and its President has very little to do." Well, that's pretty much the way it seems to me. The Vice-President, the Secretary, the Clerk, the Treasurer, the Historian, the Conservator, the Librarian and of course the trustees are the real "working stiffs" who keep things in order. To them all, we are, as a body, indebted. Beyond that, in reviewing the anniversary papers of some of my predecessors I find that they range widely. **Eslie Asbury** remarked that it was his good fortune that you do not require that the president be a Mark Twain. In that I am with him. The anniversary dinner paper is not prescribed by rule, only by whim.

To that end I propose to look at what has for me to have been a most satisfying experience - my continuing liberal education. I regret that my college days were so loaded with science courses, long hours in the laboratory during a then typical three year **pre-medical** course that I was ill-served when it came to the notion of liberal education.

But the club has extended my education and since we are in a manifestly political year my text for the evening is from an essay "On Political Maturity" by Robert **Maynard Hutchins** in 1971.

"I have always thought that the basic requirement for the formation of a political community is a common liberal education, an education that is appropriate to a community of free men. The purpose of the education system as a whole is to form and maintain the political community and to equip the citizen... with the means to go on learning all his life. This has nothing to do with vocational training or with what is now called career education. The liberal arts are indispensable to further learning, for they are the arts of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and figuring. They have a timeless quality. They are indispensable no matter what happens in any state of the world. They are in fact, the arts of becoming human. The object of a liberal education may be said to be the transformation of young animals into human beings."

The children of our late member and sometime President Charles **Aring** collected his 40 papers in a bound volume for which he wrote a short introduction wherein he noted: "A literary club

of quality insures against mental dilapidation. The program is akin to an ongoing post-graduate education. I would find it difficult to pick out a paper presented in my three decades from which I did not garner food for mental processing."

My experience echoes Aring's. With the expert help of our librarian Dale Flick I have looked over some of the papers that I recall hearing in my years as member and some Aring sent to me during the hiatus when we lived in New Orleans. Clearly time does not permit an in-depth survey of all the papers. However a few stand out in my memory.

I can't be certain where to begin as I've been unable to find the date of my election either in minutes or the date I "signed the book". But my memory is April 1958.

The first paper I recall was by our late member Nelson Glueck, a distinguished archaeologist and president of The Hebrew Union College. For my part I had virtually no insight into archaeology much less that of the Near East. On 14th April 1958 he read a paper entitled "Victory in the Desert." One might have been tempted to think in terms of Montgomery, Patton, and Rommel, but no, this was a story of his excavations in the Negev, the desert of the Exodus. It is a tale of wanderings of the children of Israel as related in passages from the Old Testament and how they related to Glueck's findings from his excavations. It's a lovely paper - poetic in expression and I want to read the opening paragraph.

"Bare landscapes bold colors and fiercely bright light stand out as the picture of the Negev. Strength and simplicity are its hallmarks. Hunger and thirst are its patrimony, with great treasures of ores and oil concealed in its most desolate wastes. Gaunt hills, lunar like craters and massive depressions imprisoned below almost sheer cliff walls, some fertile plains and innumerable patches of good soil in carefully terraced creek beds, wide stretches of hamada desert grayly covered with flint and slate sandstone pebbles as if the earth in abject mourning had strewn itself with sackcloth and ashes, are among its main features. The few springs and infrequent wells merely accentuate its general poverty. It is a land ravaged by drought, but where, on rare, occasion, raging freshets tear with abandon through normally dry stream beds. Little wonder that the Negev has generally been considered an arid wasteland incapable of sustaining civilized settlements."

The paper goes on to describe the wanderings of the Israelites, and where he found shards and artifacts and how he was able to relate them to the biblical story.

In developing the story of the Exodus from Egypt Glueck draws heavily on the

Book of Numbers but also 2nd Kings, Genesis, and Exodus - as guides to where one might find related artifacts. It's beautifully told and later his wife gave some of these artifacts to the club - you've noticed them in glass cases in our library.

This did not lead me into becoming even an amateur archaeologist but it did give me an appreciation of the usefulness of such work in relationship to an explanation of history. And when our eldest daughter had an opportunity to "dig" with Professor Francois Bordes in the Dordogne Valley of France my encouragement was perhaps more active than it might otherwise have been. I wrote a paper on that in 1971.

A later point in my education is historical and, indeed contemporary comprises two papers by John H. More, "Our Small Dragon" (1966) and "Small Dragon - Later Days" (1969). The dragon he describes in his opening paragraph thus:

"Our dragon, it is said, can live under the ground, in the water, in the air. It has the head of a camel, the neck and body of a snake, the scales of a carp, and the paws of a tiger. Along its backbone there is a crest of 81 large scales. It is rumored that under its tongue there is hidden a precious stone, but no one is absolutely sure of this. It has been cut in half several times and it has grown a head at each end, but one of the heads has always devoured the other half. It is known to have existed for 2000 years. Today it is again severed in two parts. Tomorrow, who knows what its condition will be. Such is the hereditary symbol of the people who are the topic of this paper."

I suspect that you have guessed our small dragon is Vietnam. Its history which he researched in some detail is one of 2000 years or more of strife; repeatedly being torn apart as its regions clashed with each other, reuniting in various ways only to return later to their original format. China occupied the north, was driven out only to redo the job - this occupation went on sporadically nearly a thousand years. Finally in 928 A.D. the Chinese were driven out and Vietnam was more or less one until the Europeans had massaged their way into a narrow strip of coast and mountains controlling variously the separate regions, melding and splitting and culminating in what became part of French Indochina whose breakup led to the United States incursion based on dubious evidence.

Had we been aware of the cultural history we might have been less eager to pursue that fateful venture - now the dragon seems to have regained the unity that resembles its early state. T. S. Eliot in "Notes toward the Definition of Culture" written in 1947 developed the idea that culture cannot be imposed though over time it may be absorbed. As an example he looked at the 300+ years of the British in India. There is a

lesson in that.

In that vein, one of my childhood favorites was the subject of "The Sahib **Redux**" by James **Bridgewater** in 1996. That of course was a look at **Rudyard** Kipling and his work. He had been of the idea that the devaluation of Kipling in recent years was unwarranted. Skillfully and in elegant prose he sketches Kipling's life as a child who grew up under the Raj and became fluent in Hindustani in which he thought and dreamed. After being sent to England for schooling he returned to India at age 16 to work as a journalist. His poems and stories Jim points out, never give us the stereotype of India but are alive in understanding that great subcontinent, its teeming people honestly portrayed.

When Ann and I took our children to live in the rural Punjab for an academic year in the 1960's, I felt that having read Kipling as a boy I knew where I was. In our rural base, motorcars and trucks had not fully supplanted the camels, bullocks, and elephants as means of transport.

Kipling was by any standard a great writer and was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907. In 1958 **T.S. Eliot** declared him "the greatest man of letters in his generation." **Bridgeland** argues that Kipling's work has historical value. "If we want to know what it was like to live in the India of the Empire we cannot do better than to read Kipling." He puts it thus: "In some ways the stories and poems of real artists are more faithful than history books in showing us how life was". He quotes Lionel Trilling in 1970:

"...We read the **Iliad** or the plays of Sophocles or Shakespeare and they come so close to our hearts and minds that they put to rout, or unto abeyance our instructed consciousness of the moral life as it is conditioned by a particular culture—they persuade us that human nature never varies, that moral life is unitary and its terms perennial, and that only a busy intruding pedantry could ever have suggested otherwise."

Jim's paper looks at Kipling with an openness and understanding of what he was - a great writer and observer of the human kind.

Every schoolboy in my day was given a swipe at Byron, Shelly and Keats. Unfortunately I can't, for whatever reason, possibly age-related loss of **hippocampal** brain cells, recall any reinforcement in college. Happily, in the case of Byron, the Club made up for that with **Aring's** three papers, all of which look at look at Byron's work as an autobiographic study, particularly as related to his wife and two daughters - and also his mother.

The first of these papers, "Ladies Intellectual" in 1968 relied heavily on the autobiographical aspects of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and "Don Juan" by quoting passages from the poems to help us understand the complex and the obscure of the poet's life.

His was a family of nobility but Jacques Barzun describes him as "...the offspring of a rake-hell father and a harassed, tempestuous and selfish mother." The father died when the poet was 3 years old leaving the mother and the young orphan in a setting where only the barest necessities were provided. Probably more destructive was the emotional poverty. He was born with a deformed right lower leg which surely did nothing positive for his image of himself, compounded by the mother's tirades, remonstrances and physical assaults laced with extravagant showers of love and kisses. To survive this, later in life, he suggested that reading was his survival, "I read while eating, read in bed when no one else reads, and had read all sorts of reading since I was five years old." In Childe Harold III. vii he expressed this. "And thus untaught in youth my heart to tame, my springs of life were poisoned."

He inherited a title and fortune from a great-uncle which provided social entree and education at Harrow and Cambridge. His sexual behavior led him into all manner of encounters with women and marriage to Anne Isabella Milbanke, a young lady of quality and high intellect who had a talent for mathematics, as would their daughter, Ada. The union lasted barely a year, when Annabella took the baby to visit her parents. Byron never saw her again as he left for the continent but wrote in 1816 in Childe Harold

"Is thy face like thy mother's my fair child!

Ada! sole daughter of my house and heart?

When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled

And then we parted-"

In Don Juan he wrote of Annabella

"Her favourite science was the mathematical,

Her noblest virtue was her magnanimity;

Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was Attic all,

Her serious sayings darken'd to sublimity;

In short, in all things she was fairly what I call

A prodigy..."

Ada's genius came out in her relationship with Charles Babbage the inventor of

the Analytical Engine, whose work she published in [Taylor's Scientific Memoirs](#) and is still considered an outstanding contribution -1 quote from it: "The Analytical Engine has no pretensions to originate anything. It can follow analogies but it has no power of anticipating analytical relations or truths. Its province is to assist us in making available what we are already acquainted with."

Both wife and daughter gave rise to Don Juan I, [xxx](#),

"Tis pity that [learned](#) virgins ever wed

With persons of no sort of education as gentlemen,

Who, though well born and bred,

Grow tired of scientific conversation:

I don't choose to say much of this head,

I'm a plain man, and in a single station.

But - Oh ye lords of ladies intellectual,

Inform us truly, have they not henpecked you all?"

[Aring's](#) 2nd paper, "Unfinished Canto" (1972) draws mainly on Byron's unfinished Canto [xviii](#) of Don Juan. Actually it was only discovered long after Byron's death in [Missolonghi](#) in the papers of the granddaughter of Byron's executor, and published in 1906. The paper is more a study of Byron's life and times than of Don Juan which [Aring](#) describes it as "a compassionate novel in verse; besides a satire upon the foibles of society, it indicts man's inhumanity, his cant, hypocrisy and political tyranny." Byron, one of the world's greatest natural forces in poetry, composed "[Donny Johnny](#)," as he affectionately called it, at the height of his powers."

The third paper "Sour Grapes: Lord Byron's [Allegra](#)" (1975) tells much of Byron's natural child by [Claire Clairemont](#), [Shelly's](#) sister in law. The child was apparently conceived in [Coligny](#) near Geneva shortly after his separation from [Annabella](#) and Ada but was born in England in January 1817. Miss Clairemont, wanting for the child the position belonging to nobility, brought her to Byron in Venice. Byron wrote to his half-sister Augusta of the child with much affection and named her "Allegra" which meant sprightly and cheerful. He was greatly amused by her childish tricks and between the second and third birthdays she was described as a particularly amiable child who increasingly resembled her father. She had his temperament - when amiable he petted

her; when not he sent her upstairs with the maids. At about four she was placed in a convent school. Aring suggests that there existed a competitive relationship between parent and child. The convent in Ravenna where Shelly visited her (though neither father nor mother did) and wrote that she was "tall and straight for her age...with the beauty and deep blue eyes her mother." He found the place "strict but not tyrannical" and carried away a message to her father to "come and bring her mother." In September of 1821 Allegra wrote "...I should so much like a visit from my Pappa, as I have so many desires to satisfy". There is no record of his responding.

In early April 1822 she developed a "series of little slow fevers" and on the 20th, died. Byron was distraught and wrote, "...while she lived, her existence seemed unnecessary to my happiness; but no sooner did I lose her than it appeared to me as if I could no longer live without her." He arranged to have her buried under a large tree in Harrow "where he used to sit for hours." On her tombstone he adapted from 2nd Samuel: "I shall go to her, but she shall not return to me."

Byron was an orphan who orphaned his two daughters and wrote in Don Juan on the topic. In the opening canto,

"The world is full of orphans: firstly those

Who are so in the strict sense of the phrase;

But many a lonely tree the loftier grows

Than others crowded in the Forest's maze.

The next are such as are not doomed to lose

Their tender parents in the budding day,

But merely their parental tenderness,

Which leaves them orphans of the heart no less."

And later in The Unfinished Canto:

"The next are 'only children,' as they are styled,

Who grow up Children only, since th' old saw

Pronounces that "only's' a spoilt child –

But not to go too far, I hold it law,

That where their education, harsh or mild,

Transgresses the great bounds of love or awe,

The sufferers - be't in heart or intellect –
What'er the cause, are orphans in effect."

Byron died almost to the day 2 years after Allegra. He was buried beside his father at the church near his family seat. Ada, who died in 1852, was buried by her own request next to her father.

One might wonder at Aring's interest in Byron's writing on orphans, but consider: Aring was orphaned at age five and suffered from a deformed right lower extremity. He wrote for the Club on orphanages in 1989, Stephan Girard's Legacy (The best U.S. orphanages).

As further to my education on Byron I remind you of Ethan Stanley's paper "An Enchantress of Numbers" (1999) which dealt in more detail of Ada's life as a mathematician.

In considering my continuing liberal education by following Hutchin's formula I've cited works on archaeology, history, literature, and poetry. All of them overlap - as they should to offer clues from prehistory to our own time. What is probably more important is that I've been stimulated to read and think of how such concepts bear on some of the U.S. role in the world of today.

Had we more understanding of the small dragon before entering Vietnam we might well have been spared that terrible tragedy, and the same might be said for our apparent lack of insight into cultural understanding of Mesopotamia. Who knows - ?

Another aspect of the Club - writing - led me to greater understanding of the region in which I grew up, for instance the role of Free People of Color in New Orleans, post-Civil War reconstruction in Louisiana, and some understanding of why the Mississippi River still flows through New Orleans rather than down the Atchafalaya Basin.

In short the Club has been instrumental in keeping my antennae out, forestalling mental dilapidation.

To that end I commend your attention to the red leather volumes of papers in our library.

Thank you.