

The Gallop To Glory

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Most of you have heard about the Literary Club's going into hibernation for almost a year and a half during the Civil War. In a surge of patriotism, so many members went off to join the army and save the Union, the Club was left without a workable quorum. Tonight I'll tell the story of a couple of other Civil-War-vintage members, too old for combat duty. They collaborated in a fascinating effort that sparked a tremendous boost in the morale of our troops and the whole nation.

Thomas Buchanan Read was elected to membership in the Literary Club in 1852. James Murdoch came aboard three years later in 1855. They both merit full length papers, but for now, I'll set the stage for the story of their remarkable joint accomplishment with just a brief thumbnail sketch of each of them.

"Read was a twin genius - poet and painter."ⁱ He came to Cincinnati in 1837 from Guthriesville, Pennsylvania and worked for awhile as a steamboat and sign painter. His artistic skill was soon recognized. He worked under artist, Shobal Clevenger. By 1840 he was sufficiently well known to win a commission for a portrait of William Henry Harrison. He also nurtured his talent for poetry. He traveled to Boston, where he was encouraged and befriended by Longfellow. Then on to a few years in Europe.ⁱⁱ His remarkable American epic, "The Wagoner of the Alleghenies" dated from Rome, August 1861 earned international acclaim. His friend, Murdoch, said "Thomas Buchanan Read has attained to the honor of both poetry and painting in a high degree -his pictures are poems and his poems are pictures."ⁱⁱⁱ

James Edward Murdoch was born in Philadelphia in 1811. In the late 1820s, he joined the Vigilant Fire Company there. It was an unusual team of young men, who in addition to helping to fight fires, had a debating club. It was here that young Murdoch began his dramatic apprenticeship. He studied under Lemuel White, the elocutionist who had trained famous actor of the time, Edwin Forest. By the time he was eighteen, his acting ability began to be recognized. Forest asked him to join the company in which he

was playing the star role during the 1830-31 season when the company was playing in the South. From 1845 when he appeared as Hamlet in New York, to 1860 his stage career was at its height. In 1853 he made a theatrical tour of California. In 1856, after joining the Literary Club, he played at the Haymarket theater in London, and then on to performances in Edinburgh, Dublin and other cities in Europe.

With the coming of the Civil War, Murdoch became a fervent advocate of the Union cause. Two of his sons were officers in the Union army. Capt. Thomas Murdoch was killed in action at Chickamauga. Murdoch generously used his eloquent dramatic talent to bolster the courage of the troops at the front and to comfort the sick and wounded in the hospitals. With his readings in cities of the North, he raised thousands of dollars to help the cause. He was a favorite at the headquarters of many generals and of the troops he visited. In grateful response to his patriotic benevolence, the ladies of the Soldiers' Aid Society in Cincinnati planned a celebration to honor him.

Let's turn briefly now to the Civil War in October 1864 and General Phil Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley Campaign. He had won important victories against Confederate General Jubal Early at Winchester and Fishers Hill. Now, with his divisions poised for battle at Cedar Creek,^{iv} Sheridan had been called to Washington for a conference with Secretary of War Stanton. There was a change in official strategy and important questions were to be discussed. The talk lasted past midnight. General Thomas Eckert, Superintendent of Military Telegraph, was in an adjoining room listening for reports from the front. Clicks from the instrument caught General Eckert's ear. It was Winchester calling the War Office. 'There is danger here, hurry Sheridan to the front.' The message was handed immediately to the two men in the next room in close consultation. Sheridan went to the telegraph room. There was a hurried moment of talk over the wires between Sheridan and his headquarters at Winchester. Stanton ordered Eckert to telegraph the railroad authorities of the Baltimore and Ohio to clear the road and to provide relays of special engines to take Sheridan to the scene of the conflict as fast as steam could carry him. Eckert handled the key himself, gave directions to the railroad officials and perfected the train arrangements,

Sheridan was driven to the station with all possible speed. A panting engine had

just backed in as he arrived. With Sheridan aboard, the engineer, instructed to reach Relay House in the shortest possible time, opened the throttle and sped away. It had a clear track and reached its destination, thirty miles away, in much less than an hour. Here an engine of the main line stood waiting to take him to Harper's Ferry, seventy miles beyond. There were no obstructions all the way. Every moving train had been sidetracked and every precaution taken to prevent accident to the on-rushing engine. All was anxiety in the War Office. Every telegraph station reported progress to General Eckert and he to Secretary Stanton, who still lingered to know when Sheridan reached his destination. Three hours passed. Harper's Ferry at last reported Sheridan's arrival there. A fresh engine stood waiting to take him to Winchester, thirty miles up the valley. An hour later word sped over the wire, 'Sheridan has reached Winchester'. The run had been made in the quickest time ever on the road and the worn and anxious officials at the War Office breathed a sigh of relief.

The scene of battle was some eighteen or twenty miles up the turnpike. Before leaving for Washington, Sheridan had repulsed Early at Winchester and Fishers Hill. Now the Confederates were making a stand at Cedar Creek. For several weary, doubtful hours the two armies had been in deadly conflict. With little delay at headquarters, Sheridan mounted his favorite war horse, Rienzi. He rode through the town and onto the turnpike, spurring his big, black, sinewy charger to the limit. Soon he heard the roar of artillery and the rattle of musketry. Galloping on at breakneck speed, Sheridan soon learned first hand, the seriousness of the situation. 'In a surprise move on the night of the 18th, General Early had positioned three divisions of his corps to attack Sheridan's left flank at dawn. They turned the Union flank, captured twenty-four guns and some fourteen hundred prisoners and sent stragglers running in confusion to the rear. Sheridan arrived at the field about 10:30, rallying the fugitives on the way. 'He was received by his army with unbounded enthusiasm. With his Sixth corps moved to its western side and his cavalry to its eastern side, Sheridan counterattacked about four in the afternoon and literally swept the enemy from the field in one of the most overwhelming and decisive engagements of the war,'^v It was the inspiring presence of Sheridan and his leadership that turned this Federal disaster into a victory that virtually ended the fighting in the Shenandoah Valley'^{vi} and revived the morale of the North.

Let's now return to Cincinnati. It's October 31st twelve days after the battle of Cedar Creek and the day Murdoch is to be honored by the ladies of the Soldier's Aid Society. We're in the house at 21 east Eighth St., where Thomas Buchanan Read and his wife, Hattie, lived with Read's sister and brother-in-law, Cyrus Garrett. (Incidentally, that house is right next door to the house owned and occupied by the Literary Club from 1896 until we moved here in 1930.)

Fortunately, a detailed account of the events of that day, by Murdoch himself, was published later in the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette. So, we have the first-hand, eye-witness story in Murdoch's own words.

He wrote: "Soon after the battle of Cedar Creek, I came up to Cincinnati and was visiting Mr. Cyrus Garrett, whom we called 'Old Cyclops'. He was T. Buchanan Read's brother-in-law, and with him the poet made his home. The ladies of Cincinnati had arranged to give me a reception that finally turned into an ovation. I had given a great many readings to raise funds to assist their Soldier's Aid Society, and they were going to present me with a silk flag. Pike's Opera House had been secured, the largest place of entertainment in the city. They had made every arrangement to have the reception a very dramatic event. The morning of the day it was to take place Read and I were, as usual taking our breakfast late. We had just finished, but were still sitting at the table chatting. Mr. Garrett, the brother-in-law, who was a business man and guided by business habits, came in while we were thus lounging. He wore an air of impatience and carried a paper in his hand. He walked directly up to Read and unfolded a copy of Harper's Weekly and held it up before the man so singularly gifted as both poet and painter.

"The whole front page of the paper was covered with a striking picture of Sheridan seated on his black horse, just emerging from a cloud of dust that roiled up from the highway as he dashed along. 'There,' said Mr. Garrett, 'see what you have missed. You ought to have drawn that picture yourself and gotten the credit of it. It is just in your line. The first thing you know somebody will write a poem on that event and then you will be beaten all around.'

"Read looked at the picture rather quizzically, a look which I interrupted by saying, 'Old Cyclops is right, Read, the subject and the circumstances are worth a poem.'

"Oh no', said Read, 'that subject has been written to death. There are 'Paul

Revere's Ride', 'Lochinvar,' Tom Hood's 'Wild Steed of the Plains' and half s dozen other poems of like character.'

"Filled with the idea that this was a good chance for the gifted man, I said, 'Read, you are losing a great opportunity. If I had such a poem to read at my reception tonight it would make a great hit/

"But, Murdoch, you can't order a poem as you would a coat. I can't write anything in a few hours that will do either you or me any credit' he replied rather sharply.

"I turned to him and said, 'Read, two or three thousand of the warmest hearts in Cincinnati will be at Pike's Opera House tonight at that presentation. It will be a very significant affair. Now you go and give me anything in rhyme, and I will give it a delivery before that splendid audience, and then you can revise and publish it before it goes into print. This view seemed to strike him favorably and he finally said, 'Well! We'll see what can be done' and he went upstairs to his room.

"A half hour later, his wife, Hattie, came down and said, 'He wants a pot of strong tea. He told me to get it for him and then he would lock the door and was not to be disturbed unless the house was afire.'

"Time wore on and in our talk on other matters in the family circle, we had almost forgotten the poet at work upstairs. Dinner had been announced and we were about to sit down, when Read came down and beckoned me to come. When I reached the room, he said,

"'Murdoch, I think I have about what you want.' He read it to me, and with an enthusiasm that surprised him, I said, 'it is just the thing.'

"We dined, and at the proper time Read and I, with the family, went to Pike's Opera House. The building was crowded in every part. Upon the stage were sitting two hundred maimed soldiers, each with an arm or leg off. General Joe Hooker was to present me with the flag the ladies had made and at the time appointed we marched down the stage toward the footlights, General Hooker bearing the flag and I with my arm in his. Such a storm of applause as greeted the appearance, I have never heard before or since. Behind and on each side of us were the rows of crippled soldiers; in front the vast audience, cheering to the echo. Hooker quailed before the warm reception. And growing nervous, said to me in an undertone: 'I can stand the storm of battle, but this is too much for me.'

"'Leave it to me' I said, 'I am an old hand behind the footlights. I will divert the strain from you.' So quickly I dropped upon my knee, took a fold of the silken flag and pressed it to my lips. This by-play created a fresh storm of enthusiasm, but it steadied Hooker and he presented the flag very gracefully, which I accepted in fitting words. I then drew the poem Read had written from my pocket, and with proper introduction began reading it to the audience. The vast assemblage became as still as a church during prayer-time and I read the first three verses without a pause, and then read the fourth:

'Under his spurning feet the road
Like an arrowy Alpine river flowed,
And the landscape flowed away behind,
Like an ocean flying before the wind,
And the steed like a bark, fed with furnace-ire.
Swept on with his wild eyes full of fire:
But lo! He is nearing his heart's desire,
He is snuffing the smoke of the roaring fray,
With Sheridan only five miles away.

"As this verse was finished, the audience broke into a tumult of applause. Then I read with all the spirit I could command:

'The first that the General saw were the groups
Of stragglers, and then the retreating troops;
What was done—what to do—a glance told him both'
And striking his spurs with a terrible oath,
He dashed down the lines 'mid a storm of hurrahs,
And the wave of retreat checked its course there because
The sight of the master compelled it to pause.
With foam and with dust the black charger was gray.
By the flash of his eye and his nostrils' play
He seemed to the whole great army to say,
'I have brought you Sheridan all the way
From Winchester town to save the day'.

"The sound of my voice uttering the last word had not died away when cheer after cheer went up from the great concourse that shook the building to its very foundation. Ladies waved their handkerchiefs and men their hats, until worn out with the fervor of the hour. They then demanded the author's name. I pointed to Read, who was sitting in a box. He acknowledged the verses. In such a setting and upon such an occasion as I have only faintly been able to describe to you, the poem of Sheridan's Ride was given to the world."^{vii}

And the world embraced it with open arms. 'The poem helped reignite support for the Civil War in the North.'^{viii} The New York Tribune called it 'a magnificent lyric' and ran all seven stanzas of 'Sheridan's Ride' on its front page on election-day 1864. Widely read and recited, the piece made a fine recruiting and electioneering appeal. For many years it was a favorite elocution piece for school children throughout the land.

Sheridan learned of the poem when one of his officers brought the newspaper to his tent in the camp in the Shenandoah Valley. He said, off-handedly, 'The thing they seem to like best about it is the horse'. Sheridan wrote in a reply to Murdoch on November 11, 1864, "My dear Murdoch, I thank you for your kind note to me. If the horse you rode at Chattanooga was large and jet black it is the one who made the run from Winchester to Cedar Creek. How much I am indebted to T. B. Read and yourself. It will be a great pleasure to me to shake you by the hand again.— Phil. Sheridan"^{ix}

The big, black horse, Rienzi, did receive popular acclaim. It died in 1878, was stuffed and mounted and with its name changed to 'Winchester' is on display to this day at the Smithsonian in Washington.

Read eventually followed Old Cyclops' advice and did a fine painting of Sheridan racing at a dramatic gallop on his famous charger. It was commissioned by the Union League Club of Philadelphia. The General sat for him at his later headquarters in New Orleans.

So, the impressive contribution of Literary Club members to preserving the Union during the Civil War, included not only the patriotic zeal of fifty-one fighting men including six generals and forty-three other officers but also the nationally renowned dramatic skill of a poet and an actor.

- ⁱ Robert Ralston Jones paper 6 May 1922
- ⁱⁱ Groce/Wallace 'Dictionary of Artists in America' Yale U Press 1957 Pg. 527
- ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*
- ^{iv} Boatner -Civil War Dictionary - Pg. 132
- ^v Home -Great Men and Famous Women Pg 362
- ^{vi} *Ibid*Pg. 134
- ^{vii} Cincinnati Commercial Gazette 30 Dec. 1883
- ^{viii} Shelby Foote in Smithsonian Magazine
- ^{ix} ALS Sheridan to Murdoch 11 Nov. 1864