



Eslie Asbury

Throughout our long history there have been a few members whose extraordinary love of the Club and devotion to its traditions, along with their attainments in life, have singled them out as “Mister Literary Club.” Ainsworth Spofford did more than anyone else to found the Club in the early years and went on to establish the Library of Congress under Lincoln. Rutherford Hayes demonstrated his love of the Club even while on the battlefield during the Civil War and while serving as President of the United States. Charles Wilby wrote over three hundred papers, was our guiding light in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was so highly regarded that, after a regular term as Club president in 1882, was named honorary president for the 75th anniversary in 1924. Lawrence Carr, in

addition to his illustrious medical career, generously expressed his love of the Club by bequeathing his fortune to us when he died and asking that his name be kept permanently on the active roster.

With my swan-song after having had the pleasure and privilege of being Club historian for twenty five years, I want to tell you about a more recent “Mister Literary Club,” Eslie Asbury. He disdained the name Eslie and preferred to have his friends call him As. A few of us knew him in person and cherish his memory. Those of you who came aboard since he left, for what he called the Celestial branch, in 1988 should know him better.

In addition to his long list of Literary Club papers and numerous articles in learned journals, As published several books in his later years. They provide charming accounts of Kentucky lore, his remarkable associations and attainments, and his philosophy of life all with his delightful sense of humor.¹ He felt that a person earned happiness in life, or satisfaction as he preferred to call it, by pursuing perfection in everything he did.² That was his life-long guiding principle. Our Tuck Asbury wrote a splendid paper about his father a few years ago.³ I enjoyed a special Club association with As and the honor of being taken under his generous wing as his successor historian. Tonight, with shameless use of these sources, I want to add my tribute to As.

He was born in 1895, in a log cabin according to Tuck, near the tiny town of Bald Hill in Nicholas County, Kentucky. In about 1905 the family moved to Louisville, where his father studied medicine and began practice in nearby Campbellsburg as a country doctor. As attended the small but first-rate private academy in town. He did so well academically that he was offered a full scholarship to Georgetown College in Kentucky and also a partial scholarship to the University of Cincinnati. He chose UC and earned

the tuition difference by odd jobs in his spare time including raising a patch of tobacco on the family farm. After graduation from UC in 1920, he earned a surgical fellowship at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. During his five years of intensive training there, he became Dr. Will Mayo's first assistant and was asked to stay on as part of the permanent Mayo staff. He chose, rather, to return to Cincinnati and to establish his practice here.

“Orthopedics comprised a large part of his practice. He teamed with fellow Literary Club member, Dr. Ralph Carothers and between them did most of the orthopedic surgery in the city for many years. A reliable source estimated that As did more surgery from 1925 to 1960 than any other area surgeon. He was chief of staff at Good Samaritan Hospital in Cincinnati and often had full schedules on Saturdays and Mondays at Carlisle Hospital in Kentucky.”⁴

Another important landmark in his life blossomed at Mayo when he fell in love with and married Mary Knight, fellow 1920 UC graduate and Mayo trainee. This happy union produced not only three fine children including two sons, both renowned doctors, and a very accomplished daughter but also the seed to As's membership in the Literary Club. He said he was smuggled in, in 1926, by his new father-in-law and long time member, Dr. Arthur Knight.

As never lost his admiration for the Mayo Clinic, his loyalty to the Literary Club or his zest for life. In a letter to me in June 1984, when he was almost 90, he wrote from Rochester, “Many thanks for telling the Club of my enforced absence! If you ever need a serious major procedure the Mayo Clinic is still headquarters. I am coming home tomorrow having been hospitalized only 8 days for two operations, prostate and hernia, three days

apart. Tell Woodie Garber I've been preparing my 12-minute stint for the anniversary dinner.”⁵

In addition to his busy medical practice, As found time to engage in another interest in his spare time that developed into an amazingly successful enterprise. In 1935, As bought a run-down, Nicholas County Kentucky farm of 250 acres and pertinent buildings for \$60 an acre. It had been the home and farm of Thomas Metcalfe who served as governor of Kentucky from 1828 to 1832. In its early pristine beauty, Henry Clay visited there and called it a “veritable forest retreat,” a name it bears to this day.

Following his philosophy of earning satisfaction by pursuing perfection, As turned Forest Retreat into a handsome, productive show place. The mansion and barns were restored, trees and shrubbery planted, gullies filled and the land rejuvenated. Two years after acquiring the farm, he savored an interest in breeding thoroughbred horses. Begun on a modest scale, the farm grew, along with the necessary staff and trainers, to 1200 acres and to house as many as 300 horses in the spring breeding season with a roster of ten top stallions. It was the first to breed winners of both top Kentucky races. Forest Retreat produced Kentucky Derby winner, *Determine*, in 1954 and *Hail to Patsy*, winner of the Kentucky Oaks (the filly version of the Derby) in 1969. Forest Retreat yearlings often brought record prices at the prestigious Keeneland sales.⁶ This was a remarkable achievement for what began as a weekend hobby.

As's reputation as a breeder of fine thoroughbreds spread far and wide. He was the first Kentucky horseman to be elected to the exclusive Jockey Club and was named *Man of the Year* by the Thoroughbred Club of America in 1977.⁷ He acquired friends in the horse-breeding business throughout this country, Canada, Europe and South America. Through

friends in England, he attended the Royal Ascot and met Queen Elizabeth. It was probably the only time in his life he was slightly flustered by the regal solemnity of the occasion. He savored the incident and wrote about it in two of his books, It deserves a generous quote. He wrote,

“In 1956 at the annual dinner for the Jockey Club at Saratoga, sitting between Jock Whitney and Paul Mellon and emboldened by champagne, I jokingly said. ‘Jock, now that you’re Ambassador, how about getting us into the Royal Enclosure at Ascot?’ ‘I’ll arrange it,’ he replied, and to my astonishment a few months later, along came the official documents signed by the Queen.”

“Next June we arrived in London and hurried to the Embassy where we found more protocol. To obtain badges each guest had to appear at the office of the Duke of Norfolk in St. James Palace, a visit well worth the entire trip.---- We then proceeded to Moss Brothers, who have rented thousands of Ascot outfits for 200 years. Though the store was crowded, our clothes, ordered by measurements and ten pounds in advance, were ready. They fitted perfectly but when I looked in the mirror, I had to confess no matter how far you take a boy out of Carlisle, Kentucky, you can’t take Carlisle out of the boy. I looked like a vaudeville comedian!”

“With the Ascot meeting two days away we had time to visit Newmarket, the world capital of racing and to meet and have lunch with Captain Cecil Boyd-Rochfort, trainer for the Queen and our official host.” As had known the Captain through horse dealings several years earlier and devoted a whole chapter to him in one of his books.⁸

“Promptly at one o’clock on each day of the Ascot meeting, absolute quiet descends as all eyes are directed down the race course to watch the arrival of the Royal retinue in four-horse carriages. Before each race in

which the Queen has an entry, resplendent Capt. Cecil Boyd-Rochfort escorts the Queen and two or three of her party to the saddling paddock. The Captain instructed me to follow closely, hoping to find an opportunity for a casual introduction. One day the propitious moment arrived and the Captain said, 'Your majesty, this is Doctor Asbury, member of the American Jockey Club. He bred *Determine*.' 'What a pleasure,' she replied, 'and you bred the little grey that won your Derby. He was by our *Alibhai* wasn't he?' The only response As was able to muster was "Yes Ma'am."⁹

Under less pompous circumstances his meeting of other prominent people grew into lasting friendships, often with serendipitous results. His association with well-known author, Louis Bromfield is one of several good examples. They met at a land conservation symposium in Cincinnati in 1948. Their common regard for the land sparked visits by the Bromfields to Forest Retreat and by the Asburys to Bromfield's Malabar Farm.

Bromfield's daughter, Mary, was married to a Mr. Geld, manager of a large coffee plantation in Brazil. In 1958, when a Mr. Jose de Mello, the secretary of the Brazilian Jockey Club, decided to visit horse farms in Kentucky, he brought Mary Bromfield Geld along as his interpreter. After spending a day at Forest Retreat, Mr. de Mello invited As to be the Juiz Judico (sole judge) of the Thoroughbred yearling show staged annually by the Brazilian Jockey Club. It was a fabulous, all-expense paid, two-week trip for As and Mary, but he had three days of exacting work to do.

The selection committee had reduced the original 500 entries to 100 colts and 100 fillies. Breeders and pedigrees were not listed. The horses had to be judged entirely on conformation, an arduous task. As first reduced the contestants to 20 colts and 20 fillies. The final selection of the five winners in each division was made at the Sao Paulo race track with about 300,000

present on the big race day. Miss Brazil, who that year was Miss Universe, pinned the ribbons on the winning horses. When As was announced as the American judge, there was wild applause.”¹⁰

In addition to his interest in thoroughbreds As also enjoyed participating in sports. He was captain of the UC basketball team during his senior year. He played semi-pro baseball in his youthful days and was skilled enough to be offered a berth in the minors, but fortunately declined to pursue his medical degree. He shot his age in golf well into his eighties. He loved shooting quail and working his dogs. At times, when Tuck, thirty years younger, was along, he had trouble matching his Dad’s pace. For more sedentary recreation, he loved playing bridge with friends.¹¹ He knew and matched wits with such nationally recognized bridge experts as Charles Goren and Oswald Jacoby.¹²

As enjoyed collecting humorous anecdotes from the Kentucky hill country. His books are sprinkled with them. This one he heard from the president of Berea College is a good example.

“A Methodist missionary came to the mountains and went around asking people about their souls. Up a hollow, he came upon a man sitting on his porch.
‘Brother, are you lost?’ asked the missionary.
‘Why no, I’ve lived here forty years.’ replied the old man.
‘What I mean is, are you a member of the Christian family?’
‘No, but you can find Bill Christian about a mile up the creek’
‘That’s not what I mean, Brother. Have you found Jesus.’
‘I didn’t know He was lost. The Bible says He’s up yonder till he comes again.’
‘What I really mean, Brother, is, are you ready for the Judgment Day?’
‘When is it?’
‘It might be tomorrow or it might be next month sometime.’
‘Well, sir, when you find out, you let me know, will you? The old woman may

want to go both days.”¹³

As devoted considerable space in his writing to religion. He was the great, great, grand nephew of Francis Asbury.¹⁴ Francis, a disciple of John Wesley, came to America in the last quarter of the 18th Century. Covering over 250,000 miles on horseback, he spread Methodism throughout the then settled part of the country including Kentucky. Despite this remote family connection, As took a less zealous, more ecumenical stand on religion. Rather than theology and liturgy, he was more interested in the way religion works in the country, the good it achieves and even the humor it sometimes evokes. He respected and admired the nuns at Good Samaritan here and at St. Mary’s hospital in Rochester. He devoted chapters in his books on his many close Jewish friends and associates.¹⁵ He was the only non-Catholic member of the Xavier Table, a group of prominent Catholic businessmen who met weekly for lunch. On the fortieth anniversary of his membership, the Table honored him with a dinner at the Queen City Club. Tuck quotes his delightful, heartfelt response in full.¹⁶

As was awarded well-deserved honorary degrees by the University of Cincinnati, Berea College and the University of Kentucky. He was named *Greatest Living Cincinnati* in 1988 by the Greater Cincinnati Bicentennial Commission.¹⁷

As also practiced his life-long philosophy to pursue perfection as a member of the Literary Club. He attended meetings as regularly as possible. He steeped himself in Club lore and tradition. He became a close associate of Charles Wilby who as a member since 1872, when some of the Founders were still alive, regaled him with stories of early Club days. He read most of the Club minutes and many of the old papers. The Literary Club nurtured his avid interest in reading. Hearing Simeon Johnson’s 1927 paper on Anthony

Trollope put him on the trail of Trollope who became his literary idol. He read all of the novels and practically everything else Trollope published. Four of As's papers are about him. He liked Trollope's tongue-in-cheek '*Qualifications of the Ideal Club Member*' that still hangs over the fireplace at the Garrick Club in London. It reads.

“The ideal club member must cultivate a speaking cordiality with all members, a casual jollity, a willingness to exchange platitudes and to conceal contempt for any member's boring stories, low sense of humor and insane political views. Above all he should never parade his superior knowledge of all subjects except by request, and should always be gracious in his disagreements with his inferiors who comprise all other members of the Club.”

As added, “Let this be a lesson to club men every-where!”¹⁸

Forest Retreat hosted the Club spring outing on five memorable occasions and for forty-five years furnished a plump, delicious turkey for the Club's Christmas dinner. As even pruned and cared for the little garden of plants and shrubbery in front of the clubhouse that came to be called Asbury Park. He was elected president in 1956, honorary member in 1976 and served as Club historian from 1965 to 1988.

So there you have a very brief, nutshell account of one of the truly bright stars of Club history, “Mister Literary Club,” Eslie Asbury.

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John Diehl

29 October 2012

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- ¹ *Reflections* (R) (1976), *Horse Sense and Humor in Kentucky* (HSHK) (1981), *Both Sides of the River* (BSR) (1984), *Not Under Oath* (NUO) (1986)
- ² (BSR) Pg. 153
- ³ *AS as AS Was* (AaAW) Taylor Asbury 31 March 2008
- ⁴ (AaAW) pg. 4
- ⁵ Letter Eslie Asbury to John Diehl 19 June 1984
- ⁶ (AaAW) pg 10
- ⁷ (AaAW) pg 5
- ⁸ (BSR) pp 222-228
- ⁹ (BSR) pp 195-199
- ¹⁰ (BSR) pp 203-205
- ¹¹ (AaAW)
- ¹² (NUO) pg 180
- ¹³ (HSHK) pp 45-46
- ¹⁴ (HSHK) pg 44
- ¹⁵ (NUO) pp 174-184
- ¹⁶ (AaAW) pp 5-7
- ¹⁷ Cincinnati Enquirer 6 Sept. 1988
- ¹⁸ (BSR) pg 247