

Following John

Albert Pyle

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For the past thirty-three years, every president of the Literary club has, at the anniversary dinner, been faced with the inescapable but crushingly unfair task of following at the lectern one of the most revered and best loved Literarians of this or any other era, John Diehl. For many members of the Literary Club, the pleasure of listening to John's recollections about the way we were is the absolute peak of the year, year after year. No matter how hard your presidents try, we know that the club will little note nor long remember etc etc. What the members will talk about forever after is whatever the Club Historian has picked for his subject. Oh, well.

John has come by the reverence and love honestly. His brief histories of worthy members who have gone before us are the products of deep and careful research, exemplary of Literary Club papers at their very very best. What is unfair about them is first that they are simply but sturdily and handsomely crafted, expository prose died and gone to heaven, if you will. So they make anything else look flacid and overdecorated. And then John, who will probably pooh-pooh this, is as fine a reader as we have here. Never bombastic, but always perfectly audible, having written in his own voice he reads with the pacing and warmth of Russell Baker or Alistair Cooke. I cannot tell you whether his papers are so memorable because he has carefully sifted through our rolls to find the most memorable members or whether members become memorable because John has chosen to give

them the Diehl treatment. If he could be bought, I would be writing a check tonight to have him do up my elegy for when it is needed.

And just to embarrass the historian a bit more, I would like to point out that his very distinctive and pleasant voice is inextricably knitted in to a string of memories of being fed more beef or salmon than is politically correct, washing the meat and fish down with a a pleasant red, and being surrounded by congenial members, all of whom have shared the beef and the wine and leaned back in huge and vast contentment to listen to John Diehl history, a sensation enjoyed by some of us just a few times so far but by others of us a score or more, so that just overhearing his voice in the hall on an ordinary club night brings a little wash of pleasure. We are a fortunate lot, I must say.

As this is an election year, I find it appropriate to point out that John Diehl represents an exceptionally healthy balance between conservative and liberal. His papers invariably remind us of the need to cherish and preserve the traditions and values that make it worthwhile to set aside an evening a week. In so doing we keep alive the memories of hundreds of gifted, curious, brave, and sensible members who have contributed their skills to the well being of the club and the city. And John gives liberally of himself, welcoming any member who comes into his orbit with a friendliness that suggests the man is someone John might one day turn into an anniversary portrait.

(at toast to the historian)

On to business. It is the custom for the president, according to one directive somewhere in the vice-president's book which I only recently

remembered to pass on to the vice-president, I say it is the custom for the president to use his allotted time at this annual function to speak about the club and its health, how it fares or its place in the world. Which I will do. Sort of.

Since we have been honored and comforted this evening with John Diehl's final paper as club historian, I have elected to dabble a little in club history myself, and I do mean dabble. I would no more try to muscle in to John's serious work than I would take a turn at one of Gibby's gunpowder adventures or Robert Smith's Anglo-Irish rhymed walks through Dublin. I mean to be like one of those apprentices in Titian's studio or Peter Paul Rubens's art factory. One of the lads who's allowed to mix a little paint and once in a while when somebody is needed and it wouldn't cause too much damage, to paint in a little countryside, an arcadian pasture in the background background, or say to set off the master's portrait of the Pope or Venus but who wouldn't dream of tackling the papal velvet or the Venusian gauzy bits.

I want to try to fill in something of the surroundings of the club in earlier days, knowing or trusting that there is no one here tonight to contradict with first hand knowledge. And there is a purpose. Just as it is useful and enlightening to know some detail of the world in which, say William Shakespeare wrote, it is, I believe, useful and enlightening to know something of the surroundings in which our predecessors found themselves, particularly now as we are taking one of our periodic re-assessments of the formal and informal rules that have guided us here in our own time.

An example. When the great ones established the Literary Club in the middle of the nineteenth century, almost everyone in the club could walk to get there. The city lay almost entirely within the river basin, and 7th and

Elm streets lay conveniently at the center of that natural arena. The members of the club came from rowhouses, flats, rooms, and boarding houses on streets that have for the past hundred years been given over mostly to business. The electric streetcar system that would make it nearly as convenient to live in Walnut Hills as it was to live in the West End had yet to be built. Parking was not a problem. Horseshit was a problem. The walk from home to the club, which may have take as few as five minutes for some of the members, would have been distinguished by the smells we associate now with farms and zoos. The Historian reminded us that the club met for a long while on Saturday evenings, the traditional stag night in the social calendar. The drinking that was a feature of stag nights was one of the reasons women were not part of the mix. I see it as a distinct advantage of that compact walkable city that the members could drink as much as suited them without fear of being pulled over for a breathalyzer test. Not only was the breathalyzer years in the future. Tipsy pedestrians are nowhere near as dangerous to their fellow Cincinnatians as tipsy motorists.

In addition to the foul odor of the dung and other slops, there had to have been some political poison in the atmosphere that would color a walk to or from one of the club's early rented quarters. In the 1850s, for example, the fugitive slave law was the law of the land. The young men of the Club, the majority of whom seem to have been abolitionists and unionists, jostled for sidewalk space with an enormous number of Cincinnati copperheads. The Enquirer of the day was a newspaper with southern sympathies. The merchants of the city did considerable business with the south. It is always interesting to consider how those Cincinnatians, a very churchy lot, reconciled their Christian tenets to the economics of chattel

slavery and then to wonder what adjustments we make nowadays to accommodate business or custom.

While discussing the walkable early city, it is mildly interesting to note that in Cincinnati, as in many other cities, a not insignificant number of suburban homeowners, whose children have moved away, have unloaded the suburban house with its high maintenance yard and gutters and moved into central city apartments. Rowhouses and apartments have returned to streets in the basin. It is equally noteworthy that children who can afford to move out of the suburban basement overwhelmingly choose to live in the city. So future members of the club may once again stroll to and from 500 East 4th, commenting on the quality of the offerings, and enjoying the much cleaner air.

One of the early homes of the Club was in the Smith and Nixon building, a piano company on Fourth Street between Main and Walnut with an enormous auditorium where the Democrats nominated James Buchanan, Lincoln's predecessor, as their candidate at the 1856 convention. It's amusing to wonder what the young bucks of the Club might have had to say about the make-up of the convention, or of its platform, a dreadful document that you can, thanks to the internet, go home and read tonight. The members must surely have discussed the platform's insistence that the federal government had no business interfering in any way with the states in the matter of slavery. The number of members who fought for the union side tells you much of what you need to know.

Another conspicuously different characteristics of the early club was its youth. Let us take as an example one of the early greats, Manning Force, a gentleman whose portrait the historian drew for you at an earlier anniversary supper. When the Literary Club was founded, Manning Force,

born in 1824, was 25 years old. Ainsworth Spofford, the eventual Librarian of Congress was 24. The Literary Club was an evening out for men with the energy and inclination to make music and debate and to fill the evenings with what interested them. You will recall, or perhaps the time is so distant that you will not recall how it is when you are twenty-five or thirty. Growing old is an abstract idea, something that happens to other people. The idea that their institution would become conspicuously gray when it was not conspicuously bald would simply not have occurred to the members in the first days.

Like most cultural institutions, we at the Club fret about the need to attract young men to our number, but there have been significant cultural changes that make it rather more difficult now for men in their twenties and thirties to take off an evening a week to be a club man. The Literarians of the nineteenth century, as they acquired wives and children, had household help. Cheap immigrant labor meant that the wife left behind for an evening was not left alone. In our own time, when household help comes from China and plugs into the wall, a thirty-five year old father of small children is expected to take on his fair share of hands-on responsibility for the needs of his offspring and is unlikely to see a way to take an evening off, spending time with the boys down at the club once a week.

Another difference between the young men of then and those of today: today's young men, particularly the men in what used to be called white collar jobs, spend their days working alongside women who are their social and professional equals. They have professional relations and friendly relations with women in ways that were if not unheard of, much rarer in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. Our predecessors clearly had no trouble explaining to themselves and the world just why it was that

Harriet Beecher would not be suitable for membership despite her inclusion in the Semi-Colon Club, but times are different. Nowadays, a good many candidates for membership find themselves reporting to supremely capable women. Some of us even have daughters who have entered the professions, clever women whose conversational weapons are as sharp as any. It is imperative, then, that the review of our customs and habits include a rationale we can all understand and defend to those bright young men and women who ask just what it is we do here and why we do it the way we do.

Of course, thanks to our historian, we know that the Club has not always been inflexibly orthodox. In his explanation of the Appleton window, John reminded us that Susan Avery Appleton attended a regular meeting of the club on the occasion of the installation of the window in the Library in 1931. And at the same occasion, not unlike our trustee Allan Winkler, a Mr. Beddoe sang two songs. The roof did not open up. The floor did not cave in. And in another paper, John told us that General Manning Force wrote jubilant verse about the pleasures of Ladies Night at the Literary Club. Ladies Night at the Literary Club. What do we make of these anomalies? Was someone pushing the envelope? Or were traditions less ironclad. Hard to say

As we turn the page on John Diehl's record of our lives, it is tempting to try to summarize three decades of these wonderful portraits in words, but the task is too great and the time is too short. All I can now do is suggest that as you walk to your car or walk to your home, as you hang up your dinner jacket and find a place for your tie, that you remember the men whose portraits John has entered into our logs, that you remember their energy, their ambition, their achievements, their intelligence, their songs, their debates, their humor, their fondness for each other and their

association, and that you remember you have had one of the best in your own company in your historian.