

Literary Club
165th Anniversary Dinner
Presidents Address
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The Vice President's Book describes that the President's Address should include references to The Literary Club's history. That admonition was not necessary since I have been giving a lot of thought about the identity of this club and why it has thrived for 165 years. Research for this paper cannot match our Historians thoroughness, but did include looking into the history of this club, and those clubs that preceded even The Literary Club's founding in 1849.

One such club has a continuous 240 year history starting in 1774 in Philadelphia. I was not going to include it in this paper since their purpose does not align with ours, until a national newspaper featured it recently, and stimulated renewed interest. Among the common themes is that new members are voted with a white ball/black ball system using a wood box virtually identical to those that we use, and they elect their officers by democratic process with an active membership about the same as our club. They do have two customs that I think the Board of Management should consider. One is that a new member's initial response must be to stand on a chair and sing a song from their Book of Bawdy Songs, that include tender ballads such as "Take It Out At the Ballgame" and "No Balls At All." Brings a tear to your eye. Also, the new member is expected to open a bottle of champagne with a sword. Risky but entertaining. However, "The First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry," is an active part of the U.S. Army National Guard, and other requirements may be more difficult for us, such as galloping on a horse and displaying fierceness by attacking an enemy, symbolized by a watermelon, with a cavalry sword. The image of me - or many of you - careening on horseback, waving a sword like a man fighting off a swarm of bees was not appealing. Also, their ranks fluctuate depending on the call to fight as ground troops in various wars up to and including Afghanistan and Iraq. This is a most unusual club with similarities, but too different in purpose to be a guide.

Although a real scholar could trace literary clubs like ours back to the Greek gatherings of philosophers, the real history of our club and many like it starts with The Club in London in 1764. I am sure that you well know that the initial nine members were led by Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds as well as notables Edmund Burke and Oliver Goldsmith. The Club, also known as The Literary Club or The Dinner Club, met on Monday nights at 7pm, initially at the Turk's Head Inn. Their toast and motto was "Esto perpetua" or "Let it be perpetual." Robert Smith was a great resource to me with information about The Club – although he swears he was not an initial member. The Club grew to a membership of more than 40 over nearly two centuries, but was not perpetual except in the clubs, like ours, that continued what they had started. It appears that The Club lasted until the mid-20th Century and was one of many

organizational victims of World War II. The Club is memorialized in our rooms with a portrait of Oliver Goldsmith in the style of Joshua Reynolds, a fragment of Samuel Johnson's house, an engraving of a literary party at Joshua Reynolds home, and a photo portrait of Samuel Johnson in the style of Joshua Reynolds. Soon, thanks to Robert Smith, we will have a portrait of Edmund Burke to add to our collection. You are encouraged to look at Bob Dorsey's listing of all the artwork in the club as posted on the website. Also, in response to the membership vote in May, the Trustees are planning an Open House to provide a tour of the club house and our art for members and guests in the Spring. Much more on that at a later date.

The reason for connecting back to The Club is to help understand what makes this Literary Club so special. If we think about The Literary Club from the view of someone who had superficial knowledge of our purpose, the simplicity must be startling. We are a group that meets once a week for about two hours in a small house that is a historic artifact in downtown Cincinnati. The house is barely large enough for the current membership with a library, a gathering space, and reading room. This meeting includes social time to greet fellow members, a paper by one of the members, and a light supper. That's it. Commerce is not transacted, no deity is worshipped, political actions are not planned, nor are any actions taken that go past club walls except for the use of papers by future historians. Yet, there is a palpable sense of emotion and ownership by the members that transcends this simple description of what goes on here. A deeper look at the numbers verifies the intensity of feeling. The average attendance at a meeting is about 70% of current membership, 60% of the members have joined in the last ten years, and a formal dinner gathering (tonight) draws over 75% of the regular membership. This is an active, passionate club that attracts new members, and defies any Twenty-first century cultural view.

Perhaps someone outside the club would look at the titles of papers that are read, and try to ascertain the purpose. However, our clever naming of papers makes this a bit difficult. For example, a not quite random selection of paper titles from last club year can prompt interesting conclusions. The titles: "*Looking Back on Today, Whither Are You Going?, Memories May Be Beautiful and Yet, and How the Mirror Betrays Us,*" could cause an observer to conclude that we are a sentimental group mired in past reflection. Or, the titles: "*Athletes and the Academy, Joan Benoit and Arthur Ashe, The Best Shot, and The Sweet Science and Beyond,*" would certainly indicate that this is a gymnasium or sports club. How about: "*Slaughter of the Lambs, The Miami Slaughterhouse, The Macabre on Quinby Square, or The Black Hole of Philadelphia?*" Sounds like a Stephen King retrospective. How in the world could anyone analyze: "*Why Do Giraffes Have Long Necks, Humbugs, or A Quill?*" These are just samples, but it is clear that the members are not drawn to the club for any specific type of subject - even if the subjects described the true nature of the paper.

The material presented every Monday night is as far ranging as the titles just listed. Some are of historical interest, others tell personal family stories, some are topical essays, a few are poetry,

and others are fiction. The intent of most papers is to educate and entertain, and almost always reveal a bit of the reader in the process. It is like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates "You never know what you are going to get." We never know what each reader is going to bring to us, but we are drawn to be here and experience the paper. We value the thoughts and effort of each reader in a way that is certainly counter-cultural in 2014.

Let's go back to what may be called simpler times when The Club was started in 1764. Samuel Johnson was obviously the intellectual leader of the group, and a giant of English literature. Certainly, young Samuel did not have an auspicious start. As an infant, he contracted a disease called scrofula from his wet-nurse that left him deaf in his left ear, very poor vision in his left eye, and what was called "dim vision" in his right eye. Also, the disease and a later case of small-pox deeply and permanently scarred his face. As an adult, he exhibited a variety of tics and mannerisms that are now recognized as Tourette Syndrome. He spent his life overcompensating for these disadvantages by developing his capabilities as a writer and speaker, all fueled by an incredible mind. Not unusual at the time, his early education was a bit spotty due to his less than affluent parents, and he was forced to leave Oxford after only one year – his last formal education. Hardly the image of an individual that would become one of the greatest thinkers and writers in the English language – quoted only less frequently than William Shakespeare. After struggling for years eking out a living by occasional articles and poems, he was given a commission to write the first authentic dictionary of the English language. This seven year effort was published in 1755, and, not only made his reputation, but lasted in one form or another for a full 150 years until the publishing of the Oxford English Dictionary in 1928.

Johnson started The Club as a way to broaden his own background, sharpen his wit, and provide a congenial group where he could find refuge from his bouts with depression. His early conclusion was that a membership of 12 would be the limit of effective discussion, and required unanimous agreement to any new member. Those early meetings were almost entirely discussions on whatever subject was either current or had piqued the interest of one of the members. The writing of papers came later as the membership expanded. The desire was to have members that represented a broad range of thinking and science so that discussions could be enriched by the informed views of fellow members. Like those of us today, Johnson sought out the company of people he could trust for honest opinions and discussion as a way of keeping the mind fit to handle the pressures of the society of the time. This well quoted icon had several things to say to us today. Here is a sampler:

"You hunt in the morning, and crowd to the public rooms at night, and call it diversion; when your heart knows it is perishing with poverty of pleasures, and your wits get blunted for want of some other mind to sharpen them upon. There is in this world no real delight (excepting those of sensuality), but exchange of ideas in conversation; "

"It is scarcely possible to pass an hour in honest conversation, without being able, when we rise from it, to please ourselves with having given or received some advantages."

After the exercises which the health of the body requires, and which have themselves a natural tendency to actuate and invigorate the mind, the most eligible amusement of a rational being seems to be that interchange of thoughts which is practised in free and easy conversation; where suspicion is banished by experience, and emulation by benevolence; where every (one) speaks with no other restraint than unwillingness to offend, and hears with no other disposition than desire to be pleased."

What Johnson describes is what happens here every Monday night – particularly if you permit me to broaden Johnson’s “conversation” to include the paper read each night. Earlier in this paper, I talked boldly about the passion that invests this club with its *raison d’être*. Exposing our writing to fellow members is an act of trust as valid as those Johnson listed for conversation. This quote from Johnson’s periodical “The Adventurer” captures the essence of The Club and The Literary Club of today:

"To fix the thoughts by writing, and subject them to frequent examinations and reviews, is the best method of enabling the mind to detect its own sophisms, and keep it on guard against the fallacies which it practises on others: in conversation we naturally diffuse our thoughts, and in writing we contract them; method is the excellence of writing, and unconstraint the grace of conversation."

When we do it right, The Literary Club provides a sort of haven from the constant impact of moment to moment crises in our world. This has always been the case, but the impact of global media, internet accessibility, political bickering, and general boorishness has increased to be a constant buzz in our consciousness. Here, in these unique walls, we can talk about a variety of topics without trying to harangue another, but to understand why our friend holds an opinion different than our own. Republicans and Democrats can actually talk about issues, and often find common ground, or at least understand each other. Doctors and lawyers can talk about torts and medical issues without shouting or litigation. Members in business can talk with professors and often find each other capable of insight about our political/economic system. One last quote, from Thomas Percy, a writer who was one of the first 12 members of The Club about what he saw as Johnson’s goal for membership:

"It was intended the Club should consist of such, as if only two of them chanced to meet, they should be able to entertain each other without wanting of more company to the pass the evening agreeably."

Standing at this podium every week is a member who exposes personal thoughts and writing with the hope and eagerness of pleasing fellow members. The members come with the expectation of learning and perhaps being entertained. For both reader and audience, there is a level of trust that has been forged over 165 years, and will continue - if we choose to focus on the conviviality, excellence of thought, and willingness to join in healthy

discourse that characterized Samuel Johnson's club and our Literary Club now and in the future.