

The Literary Club as an American Cultural Institution

(Presidential Address, October 26, 2015)

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Any club that is still alive and flourishing 166 years after it was founded deserves all the praise we can give it. Most clubs don't last that long. Many clubs fold in a generation or less, but ours is the oldest literary club in the country. Though there is a constant turnover, with members coming and going at will, the club goes on defying time, meeting regularly once a week, nine months of the year, and giving papers on schedule every Monday night in this clubhouse. The clubhouse is older than the club, but it is as durable as we are. Somehow the Literary Club has found a way not to devolve, but to evolve, to renew its energy from year to year, to become something more than a club, to become, in fact, an American cultural institution. Don't just take my word for it: all you have to do, if you want to find the cause of our longevity, is to leaf through the early papers that have accumulated in bound volumes in our library, and look at the later papers posted on our website, where you will see for yourself how the interest has been maintained, how the sophistication of style and range of topics has grown, quietly but noticeably, from year to year. There has been a high level of interest all along, as is evident in the early papers, as well as in the more recent papers given by members who are here tonight. But in over a century and a half of meeting and sharing thoughts in writing, the club has more than doubled its size, widened its horizons to encompass the globe; and raised its literary standards, as members traveled more broadly and acquired more and more advanced education in a wide variety of fields. It's an exhilarating exercise, to read papers written long ago by members of this club, and to compare them with more recent ones. If you sample a few papers at a time in our library, or on our website, it may be habit-forming, but not life-threatening, on the contrary,

it is life-enhancing. You can be transported willingly into the past to share thoughts of people who actually lived it. Our past was their present. My own random sampling in the past decade has convinced me that the quality of our papers has improved over the years, maturing like good wine, not by intellect so much as by education and travel, as more and more members have explored the world and earned graduate and professional degrees in many subjects at many different universities. Travel is broadening; advanced study gives rise to new interests, and induces a larger vocabulary, along with greater care in the choice of words. The Literary Club began meeting in October of 1849 for the purpose of cultivating intelligent discourse, and the papers show that on the whole we have gotten better and better at it. The fact is that Americans today are less provincial than they were a hundred years ago, and the result is a more international perspective emerging in the papers given at this club.

I do not mean that the Literary Club has ever tried to do anything but live up to its title. From the time it started meeting in October of 1849, it had made up its mind to be a literary club, not a civic club or a fraternal society. The number of members was much smaller to begin with, ranging from 30 to 45 until well after the Civil War, and the average age was more youthful, but the founders were every bit as serious about what they were seeking as we are. They debated major issues every week; they were not about to waste their time on trivial affairs. When Eslie Asbury gave the Historian's Address at an occasion like this one, the 126th anniversary dinner of the club, on October 27, 1975, he gave full credit to what the founders had created: "This small group of very young professional men sought the best and most diversified minds available, met once a week and formally discussed a question selected two weeks in advance." They were seeking intellectual companionship, and they chose the right people to promote it. By the time Eslie Asbury addressed it, the club had grown in size to a hundred members, and could count

among its former members two Presidents of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes and William Howard Taft. It could also count among its guests some of the leading writers of the 19th and 20th centuries: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oscar Wilde, Matthew Arnold, Mark Twain and Robert Frost. We are the lucky heirs to one of the country's best-kept secrets, since the history of the Literary Club, rich though it is, is known to few people besides ourselves.

Such was never the case with our historical model, the original Literary Club of London. They were famous before they began to meet, in the mid-18th century. They were not just a club; they were The Club, already a cultural institution. But that club, illustrious as it was, did not last long, and it no longer exists. It survives as a memory, as a distinguished part of English history. The chief founders were Sir Joshua Reynolds, a world-renowned painter, and Samuel Johnson, the leading man of letters of his day. Their presence alone guaranteed instant fame. They were not a debating society but a gathering of exceptional men who simply enjoyed talking to each other. Reynolds set so high a value on Johnson's conversation that he formed the club so that Johnson could exercise it freely. Johnson did so, and the eventual result was that readers around the world have shared Samuel Johnson's memorable phrases, by means of James Boswell's famous biography, *The Life of Johnson*, which consists largely of quotations from conversations Johnson had with fellow members of The Club. The Club met weekly at a coffee house in central London to talk about whatever they pleased, and they brought to the table some of the sharpest minds in London. When Johnson talked, Reynolds and Boswell listened, and so did Oliver Goldsmith, the Irish poet, novelist, and playwright, and Edmund Burke, the Irish member of Parliament known as its most eloquent orator, and David Garrick, the foremost actor on the London stage, and Edward Gibbon, the historian of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Adam Smith, author of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Their membership was impressive

by any standard, and we have reminders of it on our walls to inspire us as we engage in activities much like theirs. One of our engravings shows the select members of The Club in deep conversation around a dinner table, and next to it on the wall is a copy of Reynolds' portrait of Johnson, typically scowling. Johnson kept the conversation lively with his devastating wit and often brutal honesty: "I hate mankind," he once said; "for I think myself one of the best of them, and I know how bad I am." There is a friendlier portrait of Goldsmith on our walls, and just recently, we have added a handsome oil portrait of Edmund Burke, given to us by a former president of our Literary Club, Robert Smith, who just happens to be Irish, and also happens to be, like Burke, a graduate of Trinity College Dublin.

Though we cannot boast the talents or fame of that original Literary Club, we can claim to have outlived them. We can also claim that we honor their traditions in many ways, while we have been developing traditions of our own. We meet once a week as they did, though in better quarters than an English coffee house, and we enjoy good food and drink as much as they did, and we listen, not to a series of brilliant monologues, but to an original paper delivered by one of our members on a subject of his choice. That is where our practice differs most from theirs. We enjoy conversations as much as they did, but we wait until after the paper is read to engage in them. Our papers are written and delivered verbatim, not spoken impromptu, and each one comes from the interests and personal experience of the author. The Literary Club paper, as it has evolved, is a form of enlightened self-expression, a type of personal essay peculiar to the club, though it wasn't always that way, for the form of expression has changed considerably over the course of our history. In the beginning, there were open debates on chosen topics of the day, with the pros and cons argued, ending with a vote on the winner. The topics were always challenging, and some are as relevant today as they were over a century ago. The first minutes,

which are preserved in our library, tell us what the members chose to talk about at their weekly meetings. Should capital punishment be abolished? The verdict was no, and capital punishment is still legal in this country, though it is more often disputed than executed. Is a League of Nations practical? No again, and our experience with international government has been problematic, to say the least. Should the club admit women? It was No in 1853; it is still No today. Does increasing prosperity necessarily lead to increasing happiness? (Rutherford B. Hayes was one member who argued against that proposition.) Some questions were historical: for instance, was the career of Napoleon Bonaparte beneficial to mankind? Opinions differed, then as now. Many today would compare Napoleon to Hitler, as a ruthless military leader willing to slaughter thousands in a vain effort to conquer the world, while others (especially if they are French) think of Napoleon as a great lawgiver who established the Napoleonic Code, and whose remains have been enshrined in an elaborate tomb in the Invalides, one of the major attractions in Paris today. Should the rich pay a higher rate of taxation than the poor? They said Yes; our tax laws agree. These weekly debates were the club tradition through the first decade of Literary Club history, and they are proof that the founders had strong opinions and chose to tackle substantial questions, even if they provoked divided opinions that could lead to heated and unresolved arguments.

There was the problem, for when the Civil War erupted at the end of the club's first decade, it suspended meeting for a few years to let tempers cool. But it began meeting again in 1864, with the war still raging, but with a new Constitution, and a new program: presenting individual papers instead of staging debates. The debates had been stimulating, as some of our recent budgets have shown they can be, when argued with vigor and without rancor. But what has evolved into our currently preferred practice is less contentious and more instructive.

Debates foster differences of opinion that may linger and fester. Delivering written papers on individually chosen topics serves to promote good fellowship, and encourages sociability, which has long been a club tradition. Some time after the Civil War tore the country apart, it was wisely agreed that what we really want to hear from each other is a thoughtful response to what Socrates learned from the oracle of Delphi. Gnothi Seauton. Know Thyself.

I can testify that the oracle was wise: in my nine years in the Literary Club I have learned more about myself than I ever knew. The same thing must have happened in the minds of the early club members, because a young lawyer named Rutherford B. Hayes went forth to become a Union general in the Civil War, then was elected Governor of Ohio, and was later elevated to be President of the United States. His devotion to the club was so strong that when he was elected President in 1876, he invited all the members living in Washington to have dinner with him at the White House, an occasion so successful that he invited the members still in Cincinnati to come to a second White House dinner. One of his colleagues in the early Literary Club was Alphonso Taft, whose papers in February and March of 1886 show that the change from formal debate to written essay was firmly anchored. Any member with access to our website can read the two papers Alphonso Taft presented to the club more than a century ago, a pair of fascinating narratives of his personal experiences as an American diplomat. What he observed in the late 19th century, when he was serving as the American Minister to the court of the Emperor Franz Joseph in Vienna, brings the past vividly back to life, with an eyewitness account of how a soberly dressed citizen of the new republic could move with dignity among the elaborately gowned and beribboned royalty of Europe. Alphonso Taft was one of the early stars of the Literary Club, but he did not get to be as well-known as his son, William Howard Taft, a Literary Club member, who would become not only President of the United States but Chief Justice of

the Supreme Court. It is to the credit of the founders that, with only thirty or forty members, they were determined from the beginning to make their mark, raising enough money in the 1850s to pay expenses for Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leading American essayist and lecturer of his day, to come to Cincinnati and give a series of lectures at the Mercantile Library. Emerson came too early to sign the guestbook, but we have the first guestbook of the club in our library, and it contains the signatures of such literary celebrities as Oscar Wilde in 1882, Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) in 1885, and Robert Frost in 1960.

To claim that the Literary Club of Cincinnati has become an American cultural institution is to recall the more famous members and guests who have graced our history, linking us to the Literary Club of London, our chief model. But we are an American, not a British, cultural institution, and that means we are more democratic than our famous model. In fact we are really a society of peers. Whatever eminence any of us may have achieved, in this club we are all equals. No matter how young or old, we are here because we like to read and especially to write. We leave our titles at the door and identify ourselves as writers, whether published or unpublished. What the Literary Club provides is the opportunity, and the challenge, to write for an audience of educated men. It is the audience, more than anything else, that makes us a Literary Club. You are part of the audience as soon as you join the club, and it educates you. The ideal of a liberal education, overshadowed by practical studies at many of our universities, still thrives here. If a truly liberal education cultivates the desire to learn as much as you can about as many things as you can during your lifetime, realizing that even a lifetime is not long enough to fulfill that desire completely, then that ideal is with us every time we write a paper. We are here by choice. The Literary Club is a voluntary association with very few requirements: first, to deliver an original paper every other year, second, to participate if invited in an occasional

budget, and third, to pay your dues on time. In all other respects we are free to be who we are and to write about whatever interests us, so long as we can make it of interest to others. Though we come from many different professions, we are all *amateurs* in the truest sense of the word, loving what we do and trying to do the best we can. Samuel Johnson, who besides being a great conversationalist compiled the first English dictionary, once defined a professional writer as someone who is paid for what he writes. We are not professional writers in his sense; we are amateurs who write more for love than for money. And we write for The Literary Club because it is the best possible audience.

That the practice of the Literary Club has evolved from open debates to individual papers seems like a natural evolution, since debates are certainly thought-provoking, but the topics have to be chosen in advance and the two sides can never agree. Individual papers are by their nature original, because they come from personal experience; our motive for writing them is to extract as much meaning as we can from our own unique experience. No one else can do it for us; we do it with the aim of understanding ourselves a little better. Writing, Thomas Mann once said, is sitting in judgment on yourself. It is the most demanding thing you can do, and nothing is more satisfying than writing a paper for the Literary Club. It is what has caused thousands of Literary Club papers to be written and delivered in the past 166 years, all carefully preserved in bound volumes in our library. But bound volumes are cumbersome and few members take the trouble to read them. Now, thanks to the Internet, many of them are accessible on our website, where they can be read by any member with a computer connected to the World Wide Web. We have the pleasure of reading papers after hearing them, and the further pleasure of reading papers we have never heard, whose authors we never knew, whose experiences differ greatly from ours. The incentive for reading them is to see what they found interesting, and to acquaint ourselves with

the changing times and manners of our fellow Americans. Old Literary Club papers can become a time machine which carries us all the way back, as far as a century and a half, when the only means of transportation was on foot, by horse, or by boat, or by the newfangled railroad train, and the only means of communication was either word of mouth or the printed word, with no help from microphone, radio, telephone or television . To enter even for a little while into the lives of our fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers, by means of narratives told with honesty and sometimes with eloquence, by men educated in ways more limited than ours, who had as much curiosity about the world as we do, is to realize that we would be as lost in their world as they would be lost in ours. The history recorded in those earlier Literary Club papers is not the kind you can read about in books written by contemporary historians; the authors lived by necessity in a more limited and provincial world than we do, yet their minds were as active as ours in seeking knowledge that would liberate their thoughts. Their normal education was in classical Greek and Latin, once the basis of a higher education, which forces readers like ourselves with “little Latin and less Greek” (as Ben Jonson airily remarked of Shakespeare) to translate as best we can. Reading these long ago papers makes me grateful I didn’t live in the mental straitjacket of the 19th Century, and more content to be a citizen of the globally enabled 21st century, equipped with useful machines and conveniences completely unknown to them. Literary Club papers tell us much about what has happened between 1849 and 2015, how the boundaries of human experience have broadened, how knowledge in all fields of study have expanded, how manners and dress and occupations have changed radically in ways that would have shocked our ancestors. Though many changes have been for the better, the accelerated pace of life forced on us by rapid transportation and communication has taken away much of the leisure Americans once enjoyed. Writing a Literary Club paper today is more challenging for us

than it was for them, because we have more subjects to consider, more details to choose from, a larger universe to contemplate. They could not google knowledge. We can. And we have to, because knowledge has been growing exponentially in our lifetime and it is harder than ever to make sense of it all. There is solace to be had in reading papers that tell us what a different world their authors inhabited, and relief in being drawn back into that world with a lively intelligence that can be illuminating.

So let me finish my excursion into our history with a couple of examples of the discoveries that are waiting to be made in earlier Literary Club papers, many of them now conveniently available on our website. I mentioned Alphonso Taft. I gained a penetrating glimpse into the distant past when I read a pair of papers he delivered to the club in the late nineteenth century, entitled “Reminiscences of a United States Minister at the Court of the Emperor Franz Joseph.” Allow me to quote a short passage from a paper he gave to the club on March 6, 1886:

Foot-washing

Among the interesting ceremonies to which the representatives of foreign nations are invited, is that which is called the “Foot washing.” I do not suppose that it is a strange or unusual ceremony at Rome, or in several Catholic countries. But I presume that it is more imposing, and somewhat peculiar as celebrated in Vienna by both the Emperor and Empress. Twelve very old men and as many very old women, are selected for the occasion, clothed in new plain clothes, looking clean and tidy, with hair combed carefully. They are brought in carriages to the palace (the Burg) and made the guests of the occasion. I was surprised that so many so very old people should be found in Vienna and its immediate neighborhood. The whole twenty four averaged over ninety years. When it is remembered that this

ceremony recurs every year, and that they are not the same who have enjoyed the same distinction before, it speaks well for the longevity of the Viennese.

The ceremony takes place in the great ceremonial Hall of the Hofburg or Court Palace, the same in which the court balls are held. The Imperial family and princes of the blood [are assembled], arch-dukes and arch-duchesses, the nobility and aristocracy of the Empire, and high military officers, all in their gala uniforms, with swords and medals and their decorations, the insignia of the Imperial favor, and the diplomatic corps, also in uniforms, who had comfortable seats prepared for them. The [ecclesiastical] hierarchy were also there in their canonicals. Here, in short were the highest aristocracy of the empire assembled, to witness the washing of the feet of twelve poor old men by the Emperor, and the washing of the feet of twelve poor old women by the Empress. The proudest and the humblest condition of humanity brought face-to-face.

Alphonso Taft's Literary Club paper comes straight out of a world markedly different from ours, and sounds strange to our ears, with its costumes and rituals and elaborate formality. But there are more recent papers I have found equally stunning in their revelations of the past, because they show how rapidly the world changes in one generation, and from one generation to the next, changes we are hardly aware of because they happen so gradually. Let me quote another paper about the great historian Edward Gibbon, who was a member of the original Literary Club of London, though it was written and delivered only forty years ago, at the same Anniversary Dinner of October 27, 1975, at which Eslie Asbury gave the Historian's Address I quoted earlier. This paper was given by the President, Stephen Z. Starr, who chose to link a pair of dates two centuries apart, 1775 and 1975, by means of a paper entitled "Another Bicentennial: Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall":

Gibbon had had the severely classical education normal in his time; indeed, to speak of an eighteenth century education as classical is a redundancy. Plagued by constant ill health, his formal schooling was minimal. When, just short of his fifteenth birthday, he matriculated as a gentleman commoner at Magdalen College, Oxford, he had had only two years at Westminster School, but he had developed early a passion for books. His reading was omnivorous but undirected, and he arrived at Oxford, he tells us [in his *Autobiography*], “with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a Doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed.”

[His father saw to it that Gibbon went abroad to complete his education, and] Under the gentle but firm guidance of [a French tutor in Lausanne, Switzerland], Gibbon’s studies acquired a discipline and direction they had hitherto lacked. He was led to read and reread [in Latin] Vergil, Horace, Cicero, Terence, and above all, Tacitus, from whom, he wrote, he “studied to imbibe the sense and spirit most congenial to my own.”

He also learned Greek [from his tutor] and the classical bent of his mind was reinforced by the reading of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristophanes, the Greek dramatists, and preeminently Homer, who became an almost daily companion for the rest of his life, and whom he considered to be the fountainhead of all culture. Knowing no French when he arrived in Lausanne, Gibbon was completely at home in the language when he returned to England after five years. So much so, that he wrote his first book, *Essai sur l’Etude de la Literature* [*Essay on the Study of Literature*], in French.” [This book was much admired by French readers, before Gibbon had embarked on the six-volume English masterpiece that made him famous, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the first volume of which was published in London in 1776, the same year Thomas Jefferson published “The Declaration of Independence” in America and Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in his native Scotland].

Consider for a moment how different Edward Gibbon’s education was from ours, as well as from that of the author of the paper, a historian himself, who was expressing his amazement at the fund of learning that went into the making of a classic work of Western history. I am not going to claim that these two widely separate examples (from 1886 and 1975) are typical Literary Club papers, but I would observe that they were written by members like ourselves, and can be found among the archive of papers delivered at this club, which are now available to any member who wants to read them, whether in our library or online. I quote them as evidence that what we belong to is an American cultural institution, which has evolved impressively for 166 years and is still evolving, having already outlived every club of its kind. We are here tonight to confirm

that the Literary Club of Cincinnati, founded in the 19th century, is alive and flourishing in the 21st century. If our founders could be here, I think they would be pleased.