

The Literary Club Goes to War, Again

One hundred years ago, this country stood on the eve of a presidential election. The election pitted the incumbent, Democrat Woodrow Wilson, against the Republican candidate, Charles Evans Hughes, former associate justice of the Supreme Court and progressive Republican— and when was the last time you could say that with a straight face. Although both candidates raised the issue of hyphenated American loyalty, Hughes emphasized economic issues, while Wilson campaigned more on the Great War that was busy destroying a generation of young men in Europe. The administration had already pushed through Congress several preparedness bills, most notably the National Defense Act which doubled the size of the military. However, these measures, in part, were tied to the concept that a strong defense would keep the United States out of the war. Thus, Wilson’s campaign slogan, “He kept us out of the War,” helped the Democrats attract isolationist and anti-war sentiment in the West and Midwest, and even made inroads within the normally Republican German communities. In an extremely close vote, Wilson earned a second term.

Although lacking the rancor of our current political contest, the 1916 election proved divisive enough, and very slowly the poison of politics crept into the Literary Club. So, what did our Literarians of a century ago have to say about the Great War and the role of the United States.

Our most vocal member, as he was about so many subjects, was the Anglophile, Charles Wilby, whose portrait used to stare down at us from the back of this room. In November, 1914, just four months after the onset of hostilities, Wilby titled a club paper, “War on Christian

Principles.” After declaring that “a humane war was as impossible as a chaste seduction,” he criticized the emotional pull of a fatherland, particularly Germany, which he described as an autocratic society with authority centered in the military, and a society contemptuous of democracy. After quoting from the United States Oath of Allegiance—“to renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty,” he cautioned his German friends in the club who have “espoused the cause of Emperor William, the end and aim of which . . . must lead far away from the ideals of American citizenship. . . .”

While the tenor of Wilby’s remarks must have unsettled some of the club members, five months passed before another paper broached the subject of war. In April, 1915, Bryant Venable, an advertising writer for the Procter & Collier Co. and son of William Henry Venable, presented a piece of doggerel designed, perhaps, to calm what was undoubtedly an alarmingly uncomfortable atmosphere in the club. Titled “Strictly Neutral,” he wrote:

Some people love the English and some admire the French,
 and some adore the Germans and the Belgians in a trench.
 Some folks are strong for Russia and others praise the Turks,
 But I am all for Uncle Sam, who stays at home and works.

He closed this contribution to the annals of American poetry in a similar fashion:

And by the way, your crowns and robes are dreadfully out of date.
 These are the days of reason and those the garb of hate.
 So chuck your purple glad rags—they are not worth a damn,
 And get a stylish outfit, like good old Uncle Sam.

In February, 1916, George Kinsey, delivered a paper titled, "Is the World Their Oyster?" With a reference to Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor, in which the character Pistol exclaims, "The world's my oyster, which I with sword will open," Kinsey cleverly presented the German point of view that German *Kultur* was remaking the western world. "If German ideals are for the benefit of humanity," he quoted a German diplomat, "and she has the power to impose them on humanity, WHY NOT?" Kinsey's witty response was that "the world was their oyster, and, through the agency of their *Kultur*, they were rapidly assimilating its succulent juices; making friends and customers. Their grand mistake was in deciding to open it with a sword. "I am not sure," he continued, "that the oyster can turn with the same facility as the resentful worm, but in this case it seems obvious that part of the oyster has turned anyhow. Few things are more unpalatable than the oyster that has begun to turn."

Confronted with the killing fields of France, the sinking of the Lusitania, and the largely English-generated reports of German atrocities in Belgium, war-related topics soon appeared more frequently at club gatherings. Kinsey returned to the attack. In his paper of March, 1916, he spoke about "The Blight of Optimism." Here, he blamed the Germans for trying "to remove their '*Wacht am Rhein*' to the Straits of Dover." Germans claim that "their success in their bloody game," he continued, "will promote the course of democracy throughout the world." "There is a world," argued Kinsey, "outside of Germany that is devoted to ideals that are not essentially German, and he feared that the optimism of isolationism in the United States was blinding Americans to the German menace.

Up to this point, Charles Wilby's so-called "German friends" had remained mostly quiet, but not for long. Thomas Gosling spoke of his admiration for the German education system in bolstering nationalism. "The spectacle of the great German nation," he gushed, "rallying to its support in a critical period of its history all its men and women, all its youths and maidens, is one of those inspiring thoughts to which the blood leaps with a thrill." But the strongest proponent of the German position was Henry Fick. In "Ups and Downs of Germany," he read a long and sleep-inducing historical account of the creation of modern Germany, ranging from Charlemagne to Kaiser Wilhelm II. In discussing the Kaiser, he believed that "luckily for the empire as a whole, the Kaiser, with a feeling of self-importance, and credited at the time of his ascendancy to the throne with warlike inclinations, has curbed that drive for a quarter of a century, however much provoked. [The Kaiser's] sincerity in saying that his one ambition was to be known in the future as a conservator of peace cannot be doubted. Fate has decreed otherwise." In conclusion, Fick predicted that Germany will emerge from the war "more completely unified and its people more perfectly in harmony with the rulers and with the Kaiser in particular."

As the war moved into its third year, more club members embraced preparedness as a necessary step. Robert Hochstetter, father of one of our most beloved members, in a paper titled "Preparedness, a Chemical Question," analyzed Germany's great success in the manufacture of explosives and concluded that it was based on forty years of state preparedness. He wrapped up his talk by arguing that the United States should follow the German model by establishing government storage centers and even government ownership of key industries. Preparedness to be sure, but how this was viewed by more politically

conservative members is not known. By the way, the following year Hochstetter changed his name to Hilton.

Once the United States declared war on Germany, and preparedness gave way to conflict, anti-Germany sentiments strengthened. On the evening of June 30, 1917, the club's last meeting before the summer recess, George Kinsey and Charles Wilby reentered the fray, unleashing a barrage of papers excoriating Germany. In "*Weltmacht?*," Kinsey returned to the theme of *Kultur*. After admiring Teutonic industry and nerve, he claimed that *Kultur* placed efficiency over decency and that the nation, by making little effort to have friends, displayed contempt for the rest of the world.

But it was Charles Wilby who really took the offensive. "Why They Are the Hun," he titled one of the four budget papers he delivered that evening. "The Hun and Prussian have much in common in race and conduct," he asserted. To support his point, he turned to a quotation from Kaiser Wilhelm's address to German troops during the Boxer rebellion in China:

When you meet the foe you will defeat him. No quarter will be given, no prisoners will be taken. Let all who fall into your hands be at your mercy. Just as the Huns a thousand years ago under the leadership of Attila, gained a reputation by virtue of which they still live in historic tradition, so may the name of Germany become known in such a manner in China that no Chinaman will ever again dare to look askance at a German.

In "Stone Walls Do Not a Prison Make, nor Iron Bars a Cage," Wilby again brought up the question of German-American loyalty. Launching his paper with an anecdote of a nameless

local citizen who wore an American flag in his buttonhole and talked at length about how much he had contributed to the Red Cross and the recent Liberty Loan drive, Wilby expressed concerns about the individual's real loyalty. Although this man seemingly had his heart at "the right end of the hyphen," Wilby had later heard that at a private function he had toasted the Kaiser. It is never made clear whether this supposed act occurred before or after the U.S. Declaration of War, and the story may even have been apocryphal, but to Wilby the potential for treachery was real. His agitation stemmed largely from German newspapers, both local and national, and he summed up his paper with an unidentified quotation from one: "Enver [Turkey's Enver Pasha] is the soul of Turkey. He saw the political necessity of fighting on our side, and that is why he is aiding us." "Just think of it!" Wilby thundered, "our side."

Not stopping there, Wilby moved into more dangerous waters. Critical of the government's inaction, he implied that "when the lists of Americans killed on the French front begin to come in, vigilance committees of overwrought citizens may stop the printing of those papers." "It would be hard to "trump" that.

However, nothing exercised Wilby's spleen more than the teaching of German in Cincinnati's public schools. A curriculum feature since the 1840s, he pointed out that "Germans" controlled the school board, teachers of German outnumbered teachers of English, and that in many schools children were taught four hours of German daily. Worse, some teachers were legally "alien enemies," and German history and culture were commonly introduced in language classes. Then, neatly tying together his two major concerns, he claimed that "local German papers are constantly printing disloyalties. Our public schools should not

teach young children the language which may infest them with the poison of treason.”

However, there is no record that Literarians grabbed their torches and pitchforks and marched on Over-the-Rhine to wipe out this den of subversion.

Eventually, Wilby made his concerns more public. In August, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* ran an article under the headline, “Attorneys Warm Up,” in which Wilby accused Frank Freericks of pro-German sympathies. Their quarrel had started when the Mercantile Library, of which Wilby was a board member, cancelled its subscription to *Der Volksblatt*, the leading German language newspaper in the city. Freericks took offense at this. Wilby, a library board member, retorted, “The action of the board is approved by every loyal American,” and then went on to report that the German-born Freericks had supposedly expressed annoyance at the playing of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at a recent concert held at the Grand Opera House.

At the club’s anniversary dinner that year, 1917, Wilby delivered some sobering thoughts. It seems that the club’s “freedom of speech had been weakened,” and that several “valued members” had resigned from the club while others had stopped attending, indicating, in Wilby’s words, “that offense has been given by papers on Germany’s morals and methods of warfare.” . . . Was this, then, an apology? Absolutely not! Showing no responsibility for the resignations, he asked, “Why should they resign if they are loyal?” and went on to call out German-American club members for failing to criticize German plots and atrocities before the declaration of war. These men are “on all other subjects right thinking men, able to divide between right and wrong. . . . That they should be deaf and blind on this subject must be because they are incurably poisoned by their earlier teaching.”

An examination of the club's minutes for 1917 do reveal that Henry Fick, Max Poll, John H. Landis, James Mooney, Leonard Sioussat, and Edwin W. Glover all resigned during the two months leading up to that anniversary dinner. Although reasons were not given, only Glover's resignation was accepted "with regret." The others, I presume, left the club with little regret from the now thoroughly patriotic membership.

During the remainder of the war, Wilby's vision came true. German was removed from the public school curriculum, the Espionage, Alien Enemies, and Sedition Acts were passed, making it illegal to obstruct recruitment or cause insubordination in the armed forces. They limited free speech, permitted the postmaster general to exclude from the mails any material he thought treasonous, led to the establishment of the Bureau of Investigation [Thank you, J. Edgar Hoover], and even encouraged local vigilantism. The speaking of German in public places was banned in Ohio. German societies, music organizations and newspapers closed, and even libraries removed books written in German from their shelves. Some 6,000 German-American citizens or German nationals were placed in detention centers.

The impact on the Literary Club, however, proved less tumultuous. The final year of the war and the years following did bring a succession of papers related to it, mostly by members involved in some way with the war effort, and on some occasions meetings concluded with the singing of patriotic war songs. Political issues receded, although one paper debunked the newly created League of Nations, while several, including one, of course, by Charles Wilby, critically examined the threat of Bolshevism. However, the only real dissension in the club during the post-war years came from a request to allow Oswald Garrison Villard to speak at a meeting.

Villard was a noted journalist, strong civil rights advocate, ardent anti-imperialist, and, according to the club minutes—a noted “unpatriotic character.” He was denied by an overwhelming majority. Harmony reigned among this band of brothers.

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