

President's Anniversary Address  
October 30, 2017  
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Tonight we celebrate the one hundred sixty eighth anniversary of the Literary Club. We stand today as the oldest literary club in the United States. With the exception of a couple of years during the Civil War, and a few meetings during the Spanish Influenza, we have met continuously since 1849. By way of crude calculation, I estimate that in the life of our Club, we have met approximately 5,300 times, with an estimated number of papers read, including budgets, of well over 7,000. Although the precise numbers cannot be known, they are significant.

I suspect that many of you, like me, were rightfully impressed by your first visits to the Club. Although I had no concept of how many meetings and papers had taken place within this organization, it was clear by the experience offered, that this institution spanned a great deal of time. Something rare had endured.

When considering what I might write about for this anniversary address, I decided to look back one hundred years into our past to see what the Club brought forth for our sixty-eighth anniversary celebration held on October 27, 1917. As was customary in the early days, they met at 9:00 pm on that Saturday night.

I was surprised to find that the Club Historian did not participate in the proceedings as he has this evening. The President did participate, but not in solitary effusiveness. President David Phillipson was but one of seven presenters offering eight separate papers under the format of a budget. He did not speak last or first, but next to last. The gathered membership were entertained by approximately forty pages of prose and verse. With seven presenters and the accompanying applause, one can imagine it was a long night of drinking and merriment followed by perhaps more than a few chins on chests and the dissonant chorus of syncopated snoring. I will keep my remarks brief so as not to invite an early descent into slumber for any, author included.

The United States had entered World War One on April 6th of that year, just six and one half months prior to the Anniversary meeting. Spirits ran high throughout the country as well as in the Club.

This Budget of eight papers began with Charles Wilby commenting on the lack of vocal patriotism for the United States by many of German ancestry. This issue apparently had been a source of great controversy and discord within the club. Wilby lamented that few members of German ancestry had disapproved of the German tactics in the war, much less of condemning these tactics of submarine and chemical warfare. It was his contention that the "mad ruler" of Germany had systematically imbued the diaspora of Germans with a loyalty, by way of the education of the young, for the great fatherland from whence they originated. He remarked that the youth of German ancestry had been "incurably poisoned by their early teaching."

The second paper was delivered by Goodrich Rhodes. It was a letter from the front lines in France during the then current Great War. Dr. Rhodes recounted his journey from Ft. Harrison in Indiana to a small village in France where a field hospital was in full operational mode tending to the casualties from the nearby front. Like Mr. Wilby's preceding paper, he intoned against "the fiendish underhand method of fighting employed by the Bosch" and their "cowardly method of carrying on the war."

The third and fourth papers were presented by W.H. Venable. The third was a short poem entitled "Attila". Unsurprisingly, his treatment of the famous Hun was decidedly negative. The fourth paper was a short sketch of local educator George Bartholemew of The Chickering Institute, who was Mr. Venable's friend and fellow member in the "Teacher's Rifles" at the outset of the Civil War to defend the city against rumored, imminent attacks from the south.

Guy Mallon followed with a paper concerning the literary battle surrounding "New Poetry," and its free verse, versus the "stupid" criticism of the movement. He then offered a statement of caution about presenting verse to the literary club pointing out that a poor reading of any poetry utterly ruins the exercise. Moreover he thought that any poem worth hearing could not be rightly or fully grasped with only a single exposure to the poem. Mallon promptly offered a ninety-two line poem recounting his scaling of a mountain in the Rockies with his young daughter the prior year during a heavy storm.

Mr. N. M. Fenneman brought the sixth paper with a curious title: "Some Pious Reflections on the Evening Dress of Male Men." Male Men? Was this a foreshadowing or possibly a post-shadowing

of remarks made here recently? Perhaps both. The author reflected on the value of all black formal wear for men at evening social events. He thought that the uniformity of the garb echoed the United States' foundational notion of Democracy, that all are created equal and are such as citizens. Without regard for social or economic position, the black uniform of our formal evening places us in the same rank. Speaking of the male tendency to wear clothes until they unravel, Fenneman said, "...in a dignified club, dress suits of voting age associate on equal terms with others not yet paid for." I would hazard that many of the suits in evidence tonight are well past voting age if not drinking age and some may be pressing boundaries of threaded cohesion. I know mine is. He said, "The dress suit is essentially a symbol... When occasion demands the symbol, the worst dress suit is better than the best of another type."

Next came President Phillipson's paper titled "Americanism And Americanization." He defined Americanism as broadly emanating from the Greek principles of beauty in juxtaposition to the Roman's adherence to militarism. In his modern world, Phillipson interpreted the notion of beauty in terms laid out in the Declaration of Independence's famous guarantee of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Militarism, on the other hand was being woefully demonstrated by the forces of Germany and their conquests of the moment. He went on to reference the millions of immigrants who had descended upon America's shores during the previous decades to "escape the tyrannies of autocratic governments and the burdens of militarism." He also warned that the influx of immigrants presented a serious problem, the problem of "Americanization." He recounted his visit to the Jewish Educational Alliance in New York City, a school for mainly Russian Jewish immigrants, where children with broken English pledged their allegiance to the United States on a daily basis. It was clear to him that the need for Americanization was of highest import, not so that they assimilate to our cultural norms, but rather that they cleave to the notion of individual Liberty. He concluded, "...what many now consider a menace to our institutions will become a blessing and a guarantee for the safeguarding of America's great Constitution as the treasure-trove of humanity."

The final paper was presented by L.C. Carr who by way of a generous gift and request in his will is still carried today as an active member. This paper is only referenced by title in the bound volumes for that meeting. The text was omitted. This may be a testament to the length of the preceding papers such that by this hour, none were left in waking attendance.

The thread which ran sometimes subtly and sometimes not so subtly through these papers was that Democracy is a capital "V" virtue for which we have ample reason, if not obligation, to protect and advocate globally in determined opposition to militarism and tyranny.

Where does our Literary Club fall on this spectrum? Is this a club of tyrants or free men? Do our members delight in the glow of Liberty and not suffer in the shadows of Tyranny? Or is it the other way around? It is both. The dynamic which has long served us, of having a speaker well received by the members in attendance, is a symbiosis of Tyranny and Liberty. During his time at the lectern, the presenter is a Tyrant. Not Tyrant for a day, but Tyrant for a few dozen minutes. The presenter is by necessity a benevolent Tyrant, for he knows that very soon he will once again be part of the citizenry of listeners. We are tradition bound to listen to each other and to know that we will be heard when it is our turn to speak.

This was not clear to me as a new member. It appeared to me that there was a tyranny at work here, that the papers I had heard were of such a high quality that I would be hard pressed to live up to their silent, brooding expectations. Yet, as a new member, I was told that it would be two years before I would be expected to present my first paper. This would allow me the luxury and necessity of hearing enough papers to inform me as to what types of subjects would be expected by the membership. The process would prove intellectually invigorating. Yet it was also intimidating.

I found myself in the midst of a group of whom it is said that whatever one writes about, there is certain to be a member who knows as much, if not more, about one's chosen topic. Additionally, this is a group of people, many, if not most, of whom have written as a profession or as an integral part of a profession. As a pedestrian trader of industrial metals, writing did not enter into my daily routine unless terse emails about the status of a particular shipment of material counts as writing. Writing was, and still is, a difficult task for me. It induces anxiety and uncertainty, sometimes paralyzingly so.

I became a member in May of 2010. At either my sixth or seventh meeting after admittance, in the early fall of the same year, I was approached by the Clerk to see if I would be willing to be a supernumerary. I asked what that meant. He explained to me that I could be called upon at a moment's

notice to present a paper should the scheduled paper not come to fruition. Unwilling to expose my fear by smartly saying no, I, under self imposed duress, said yes. I had no paper in hand. I hadn't yet constructed an idea for a maiden paper. I felt that I had not heard enough papers to give me a good idea of what I had to offer to such an educated and august audience. Fortune smiled upon me. I wasn't called upon to wrangle a paper out of thin air. It would have been disastrous.

In due time I was given a date. Arriving at a topic was daunting. The entire writing of my first paper, and to some extent every subsequent paper, was a hand wringing, gut wrenching experience. My day arrived with me rewriting and anguishing over the content and style of my paper. It crossed my mind that my recitation would be met with silence if not derision. It would be my first and last paper. Regardless, I presented my paper, frequently noticing faults I should have caught. Upon completion I was met with polite applause. It assuaged my anxiety temporarily. I supposed that it was common for a poor reader to not be ushered out post haste on the spot, but rather dismissal would come in the form of a well constructed letter of disassociation to be received within a day or two. No such letter arrived. I was a free man! My tyranny was at least endurable.

Our Liberty in the Literary Club lies in the freedom to write of what we wish. We restrain ourselves by way of knowing our audience and the limits of their generosity. We as listeners willingly give the full freedom of tyranny to each other from time to time, for in that freedom, the writer may share with us what he wills, and it is often through this process that we are offered insights or enlightenment about various subjects including the presenter. This is a format which encourages the enrichment of the mind, for we are a group with passion for the intellect, the written and spoken word, and the connections therein.

For one hundred sixty eight years, we have put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, to share what we have learned in our years alive. To tell stories. To exchange ideas. It is our duty to give thanks to those who have come before us, to those who are with us still, and to those yet to come. It is in our thankful acknowledgment of every member's participation in this endeavor that we entrust the continuance of our Literary Club in good stead, well into the future.

My tyranny over this evening is ended. We are adjourned.

