

Alas

A hand-written MS I found while snooping around in the Literary Club's "Vault," as some refer to it, has led to my discovery of an unsettling footnote to Literary Club history. I apologize for my inability to keep quiet about this, but my silence would simply have been unacceptable, given the circumstances I have uncovered. In the Vault I blundered upon a text folded into a banker's box along with a pair of woman's button-up shoes, a lock of auburn hair, and a note of thanks to the Literary Club signed "O. Wilde, June 10, 1882." (I have since given these contents to Mr. Dale Flick for safekeeping. He has vowed not to discuss further details with anyone. ("You'll be flogged if you ask," is what he actually said.)

The Irish poet, dramatist, and dandy reportedly visited the Literary Club on June 10, 1882 after delivering a lecture elsewhere in town. An account of his behavior and dress is quoted in Historian John Diehl's *The Literary Club Essays*, pp. 29-30. Diehl's account quotes a newspaper article in the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* for June 12, 1882, describing Wilde's behavior during his presentation: "When gazing with divine abstractions up at the center of the ceiling and grinding out his rhapsodies, [Wilde] kept time to the monotonous jingle of his emphasis by gently fumbling and beating the air with a massive watch charm which dangled on a black ribbon from its fob...He has...a singsong style, with its emphasis as regular as the swing of a clock pendulum, totally without regard to the sense. Some of his sentences appear to have neither beginning nor end. As one expressed it, 'He is all commas, and no periods.'"

Little did the journalist Historian Diehl quotes realize the ironic import of the last two words of his article: "no periods." Indeed, as it turns out, the Literary Club's "Mr. Wilde" produced regular periods.

After the public appearance, "Wilde" gave a brief presentation, far short of a traditional paper, but nevertheless standing before the Club in glory for a full quarter hour of bon mots and witty aphorisms. The guest

wore a dove-gray jacket with a burgundy waistcoat beneath, striped black trousers, and one lemon-colored glove on the left hand, in which the other glove, perfectly folded, was held so as to show off the huge garnet ring on his right hand. After, the visitor stayed long enough to down a glass of sherry. Several Literarians made conversation with “Wilde”, the handwritten account from the Vault reports. It is clear that Historian Diehl did not have access to this document while penning the history of that night. One unnamed member accompanied the guest back to the lobby of the Burnet House, where they spent several hours amusing one another with stories of the strange, eccentric, and quaint Americans they had encountered. “Wilde” elaborated a tale about impersonating a certain lady of Dublin, even to the point of counterfeiting an assignation with the young George Bernard Shaw, whom he-as-she characterized as “scruffy, with unfortunate lubricious stains on his trousers.”

At some point late that evening, the Vault manuscript continues, the Literarian began to notice that “Mr. Wilde’s” hair appeared to be—there’s no better way to put it—slipping. His brow was shrinking; his coif crept closer to the bridge of his nose, as if it had come loose all of a piece. He further noticed that “Mr. Wilde’s” waistcoat was fitting very snugly around his chest. Indeed, upon discreet but closer inspection, it seemed the person had something of a bosom. Other particulars made the anonymous Literarian increasingly suspicious, not the least of which was how much higher and softer “Mr. Wilde’s” voice had grown over the hours, as if the approach of dawn were engendering some sort of, as the Literarian put it, “quivering feminine aubade.” The final detail includes, in somewhat awkward syntax, a description of “Mr. Wilde” rather clumsily depositing himself on the lap of the Literarian. This is where the fragment from the Vault ends—the bottom of the page has been hastily ripped off, leaving a jagged edge and the nether parts of several words impossible to decipher.

There was no comment or other marginalia on the document, save for the curious and possibly significant other contents of the box.

Further research (for which I again apologize; no one likes to upset the revered conventions of our Club more than myself) reveals that on the same evening of “Wilde’s” visit, a precocious, auburn-haired Pennsylvania girl named Elizabeth Cochrane and her family were also staying at the Burnet House, in Room 68, and had been for several days. Just 18, the girl was three years shy of beginning her newspaper career by writing a screed in reply to a sneering, misogynistic article in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* entitled “What Girls Are Good For.” But already, before her first publication, and before her most famous reporting, in which, among other journalistic triumphs, she duped the authorities at a notorious woman’s insane asylum, embedding herself as an inmate to report on the abysmal conditions therein, she was obviously ready for adventure. Taking her *nom de plume* from a wildly popular song by Stephen Foster, who once lived just across the street from the current Literary Club, on ground now occupied by the Guilford School, it was this girl who successfully impersonated the famous Irish writer for the literary evening, taking the podium and delivering remarks to the Literary Club.

Of course, this violation of the spirit and rules of the Club was, until now, kept secret by what might be called the Literarian Deep State. Certain members of the 1890s and early 1900s expunged as much as they could of the record, overlooking (or ignoring) the handwritten material I discovered in the Vault. It accrues to the integrity and courage of Mr. Dale Flick that this information will now be guarded and preserved. Nevertheless, despite the tight lid, oblique references to the event occasionally leaked into member’s papers over the years. There was one, dated January 14, 1907, for example, and provocatively entitled “Two Button-Up Shoes.” Given by Literarian L. Bartleby Scrivener, a description in this alleged history of women’s footwear matches perfectly the pair found in the box with the unnamed Literarian’s account of his evening with “Oscar Wilde.” Another paper, a few years later, took as its subject the art of disguise, limning

famous real and imaginary masters (and a few mistresses) of deceit, hinting that such a successful scam was once perpetrated on the Literary Club.

But I believe that not until my discovery of the MS in the Vault has the entire story been revealed. Thus I am required, gentlemen, (though again reluctant) to reiterate the sad truth of the matter. In sum, despite the Literary Club's steadfast security and iron-clad rules, on the evening of June 10, in the year of 1882, the exclusively male—*maidenhead*—if you will allow such an outrageous metaphor, since there is no equivalent for the male version—was breeched fully and completely at our podium by an impertinent lass soon to be known to the world as Nellie Bly.

Richard Hague September 30, 2019 Budget of "Tall Tales"