



## Our Mystery Member

This is a short account of the long disappearance of a famous member of the Club and his eventual rescue. Exactly twenty four days short of one hundred and fifty years ago tonight Captain George Brinton McClellan was elected to membership in the Literary Club. His election is duly recorded in the minutes of the meeting of November 17, 1860<sup>i</sup>. Since then his association with the Club was in a limbo of uncertainty for over a hundred years. His name does not appear in the list of all past and active members first- published in 1890 nor in several issues of the roster published many years later.

Why was George McClellan left off the rosters? Did he fail to comply with one of the several rules and bylaws for new members that governed the Club at that time? Could it have been his personality that turned fellow members against him? Were his political leanings obnoxious to some? Or was it just an accidental oversight that wasn't corrected in subsequent issues of the roster after 1890? Let's delve into the mystery, have a brief, closer look at this long-ago member and see if we can reach a conclusion.

Concerning the bylaws, payment of an initiation fee has never been recorded in the minutes, but the \$2.00 then required would have been no problem for McClellan. He was earning a handsome salary of \$10,000.00,<sup>ii</sup> well into six figures in today's currency. He apparently did not sign the constitution as mandated within four weeks after election but that can hardly be held against him. The early 1860s were turbulent times. Having new members sign the constitution was often neglected. There are far fewer signatures on the Club constitution than the one thousand sixty names on the 1999 roster. Theodore Greve, elected to the Club in 1885, took a different tack He wrote in the chapter on the Literary Club in his monumental *Centennial History of Cincinnati*,<sup>iii</sup> "Among the officers

contributed by this Club to the service was General George B. McClellan, General in Chief of the army of the United States, who had just been elected a member of the organization, but was prevented by the breaking out of the war from qualifying.” That, I’m sure you will agree, would have been a highly unlikely reason to be left off the roster.

Further concrete evidence of McClellan’s valid membership appears almost two years after his election when on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1862,<sup>iv</sup> the secretary noted McClellan’s absence from the meeting. The weekly list of absentees recorded at that time included only qualified members.

George McClellan was born in Philadelphia in 1826, son of a prominent doctor who founded the Jefferson Medical College. His grandfather, Samuel McClellan, as a Major, led 184 patriots at Lexington and Concord in 1775 at the beginning of the Revolution and later in the conflict rose to the rank of Major General. After two years at the University of Pennsylvania, young McClellan received an appointment to West Point, was graduated second in the class of 1846 and was assigned to the Corps of Engineers. He served commendably in the Mexican War. Then Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, sent him to Europe during the Crimean war to observe and report on European military strategy and tactics practiced in that conflict. In his spare time, he invented the McClellan saddle that was standard cavalry equipment until the early twentieth century when mounted troops were discontinued.

With the slim prospect of advancement in the small, inactive U.S. army of the time, McClellan resigned his commission in 1857 and turned to railroad engineering. He became chief engineer and vice president of the Illinois Central in Chicago. In May 1860 over competition of several other suitors he won the heart of Ellen Marcy, daughter of Brig. Gen’l Randolph Marcy under whom he had served in Mexico. She became his devoted wife and confidant for the rest of his life. His rising star in the railroad business brought him to Cincinnati in 1860 as division president of the Ohio and Mississippi RR at double his Chicago salary. He and Ellen lived at the corner of Third and Pike streets<sup>v</sup> little more than a stone’s throw from where we’re meeting tonight. One of his acquaintances in town was highly regarded Literary Club member and fellow West Pointer, Capt. John Pope. It was possibly Pope who introduced McClellan to the Club and proposed him for membership

As war clouds gathered in the Spring of 1861, a massive trained Union army became an urgent necessity. “Under the law at the time, all volunteer regiments were raised, officered and trained by state authorities and were sworn into Federal service only after they had been completely organized in the states.”<sup>vi</sup> This placed an onerous burden on the state governors. The peacetime militias were staffed by well-meaning officers who knew how to muster a parade but were totally ignorant of military strategy and tactics of a fighting war. An experienced West Pointer to train and lead the state troops became an urgently sought prize. Governor Dennison, on advice from his friend, Literary Club member Rutherford Hayes, learned of George McClellan. Dennison invited McClellan to Columbus, was impressed by his character and experience and offered him command of the 10,000 troops mandated for Ohio.

Despite a similar offer from the governor of his birth state of Pennsylvania, McClellan accepted Dennison's proposal and as Major General, Ohio Volunteers assumed command. He was a strict disciplinarian and a brilliant organizer with a fatherly concern for his soldiers' welfare. He saw that they were well armed, well fed and well trained. His troops loved him, called him "Little Mac", and seemed to feel that as long as he led them, there was little to fear.

First action of his troops was in May 1861, a thrust into western Virginia to drive out a threatening Rebel force. His Army of the Ohio consisted of sixteen Ohio regiments augmented by nine from Indiana and two Unionist regiments from Parkersburg and Wheeling. Before the battle, McClellan told his troops, "Soldiers! I have heard that there was danger here. I have come to place myself at your head and to share it with you. I fear but one thing—that you will not find foemen worthy of your steel. I know that I can rely upon you."<sup>vii</sup> After driving out the Confederates, and securing everything west of the Alleghenies for the Union and making possible the formation of the state of West Virginia, he issued another proclamation to his troops congratulating them for "annihilating two armies commanded by educated and experienced soldiers, entrenched in mountain fastnesses"<sup>viii</sup>

McClellan exaggerated the strength of the rather motley Rebel force he vanquished in western Virginia, but this first Union feat of arms provided a victory and a hero to cheer the hearts of the Union, particularly after the shameful defeat at the first battle of Bull Run. He was idolized by the people, the press and his troops. He would be the savior of the country. McClellan was ordered to Washington, received the thanks and praise of Congress, was invited to dinner at the White House, was commissioned Major General USA commanding the Army of the Potomac and finally Commander-in-Chief-USA on November 5, 1861, less than seven months after his visit with governor Dennison. There were suggestions by his admirers and fear in Lincoln's cabinet that he might become a dictator, "The Young Napoleon", though he scoffed at the idea.

This meteoric rise to fame and power might have gone to his head a bit. He was only thirty-five and in command of a hundred thousand troops, the largest army in the world. That and his complex personality became his undoing. He was a perfectionist. Every minor detail had to be in place before he moved to action. He was egotistical. He liked to give orders but not to take them. He also had an innate inferiority complex that made him unsure of his readiness and to overestimate the strength of the enemy.

It isn't the province of this paper to discuss the details of his military action except to mention his growing disdain for his former friend and fellow Literary Club member, John Pope and his shameful neglect of support that led to Pope's defeat at 2<sup>nd</sup> Bull Run. Also McClellan's performance at Antietam, the bloodiest battle of the war. By accidental good fortune, he knew Lee's plan for the engagement but failed to take full advantage of the lucky information. Many historians feel that prompt action by McClellan at Antietam could have won victory for the Union years before it finally came.

It did end McClellan's military career. His command was turned over to General Burnside. He was ordered home to Trenton, New Jersey to await further orders, which never came. He took the order gracefully. At his departure, "The two corps where

affection ran higher than anywhere else in the army, stood in long ranks facing the roadway, batteries of field artillery drawn up here and there in the interval between brigades. They snapped to present arms as the General came up, and then the rigid rows of muskets jerked all askew as the men began to yell and there was a great cry of disappointment in his dismissal all along the road. At the station where McClellan boarded his special train, a guard of two thousand men had been drawn up for a final salute. The guns boomed out – and then the men broke ranks, swarmed about the car, uncoupled it and swore that he should not leave them. McClellan came out on the rear platform, raised his hand and they all fell silent. “Stand by General Burnside as you have stood by me and all will be well,” he said. The demonstration stopped. Silently the men recoupled the car, the conductor waved a signal to the engineer, and the train chugged out of the station. A veteran recorded, “When the chief passed out of sight, the romance of war was over for the Army of the Potomac.”<sup>xix</sup>

Still a national idol, McClellan became the leader of the northern Democrats. At the Democratic convention at Chicago in August 1864 he was nominated on the first ballot to run against Lincoln for the Presidency. Hearing of it, Lincoln himself wrote, “I do not see how we can defeat McClellan in the election.” The popular vote was close, but McClellan won only three of the electoral votes of the twenty-four states participating. Some of the margins were so narrow that the result might have been different if some of the soldiers in the field could have voted. McClellan even carried Lincoln’s home county by not quite 400 votes.<sup>x</sup>

How members of the Literary Club voted is not recorded but even in staunchly Republican Cincinnati, there were swing votes for McClellan. Literary Club member and future Republican President of the United States, Rutherford Hayes, who helped McClellan launch his amazing military career wrote on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1864 at the time of the convention, “I hope McClellan will be nominated at Chicago. I shall then feel that, in any event, the integrity of the Union is likely to be maintained.” Later on August 29<sup>th</sup> Hayes wrote in his diary, “In camp five miles to the south of Charlestown, lazily listening to heavy firing on our right. McClellan probably nominated. I suspect he will be elected. Not so bad a thing if he is.”<sup>xi</sup> McClellan did not win but continued his new interest in politics and was elected Governor of New Jersey, serving from 1878 through 1881. He died October 29, 1885 within four days of a hundred and twenty-five years ago tonight.

In 1886 Ellen published her husband’s memoirs. *McClellan’s Own Story*. Along with some commentary it’s an over 600-page accumulation of all of McClellan’s military correspondence and orders, telegrams and letters to and from the President, cabinet members, and officers over and under his command. She also included all of the almost daily, personal, private letters he wrote to her, some of which, I’m sure McClellan would rather have had left out. The book appealed to a broad audience and was still in print as late as 1995 over a hundred years later. But it hit the tight little circle at the Literary Club like a bomb shell. What sparked the ire of the Club, after reading the book, was learning, among other flagrant assertions, how rudely and shamefully McClellan treated their friend and fellow member, John Pope.

Joseph Barrett took the mild, gentlemanly approach in 1896 with a short budget paper, “*A Minor Reminiscence of a Major General*”<sup>xii</sup> In it he writes, “During the winter

of 1860-61, two West Point graduates who had served in Mexico were living in this city in a quiet way that gave no hint of the very different future just before them. One was Capt. John Pope, of the regular army –the other was ex-Capt. Geo.B. McClellan who had become a railway superintendent. The latter was not a member as some supposed, though perhaps an occasional guest. Barrett’s paper is devoted primarily to the gracious charm of John Pope.

William Cochran came much closer to the pungent feelings of the Club about McClellan and his book. He pulled out all the stops, and in 1910, the year of the first published roster, wrote a scathing review he entitled, *The Meanness of McClellan*.<sup>xiii</sup> A few quotes will suffice to demonstrate the vitriol.

“Unless people have read-- his *Own Story* and his private letters— they can hardly comprehend the littleness and meanness of the man.”

“He believed that he was called of God to save the country and that he was the only man who could do it. He sometimes goes far toward admitting that he could not do it without God’s help: but never admits that God could do it without his help. He is the important member of The United States Saving Association of “God and McClellan”. . . He never acknowledges the assistance of others, unless they happen to be minor subordinates. He was pleased with the suggestion that he ought to make himself dictator, and puts it away and takes it up again as Caesar did the crown. It is doubtful whether it was ever out of his thoughts.”

From letters to his wife: “I see that the Pope bubble is likely to be suddenly collapsed. Stonewall Jackson is after him and the young man who wanted to teach me the art of war will, in less than a week, be in full retreat and badly whipped.”

“Pope will be badly thrashed within ten days, and they will be very glad to turn over the redemption of their affairs to me”.

““I learn that my troops are ordered to Alexandria for disembarkation. If this is the case I will try for a leave of absence. I don’t see how I can remain in the service if placed under Pope. It would be too great a disgrace.”

So why was McClellan left off the Literary Club roster? After reading Cochran’s paper and sensing the feeling of the members at the time the first full roster was compiled, we reach the rather persuasive conclusion that he was knowingly and purposely excluded from the list.

As the years went by, tempers cooled. Members who knew McClellan and Pope were gone. The controversy was almost, but not quite forgotten. Charles Adams in 1951 wrote an excellent paper *Our Forgotten Member* with excellent documentation of McClellan’s military prowess but no conclusion on the validity of his membership.

