

Early Literary Societies at Wabash College

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Out of the speaking past the voice of the undergraduate has never failed to be heard. The American college and the frontier developed together, and, with them, American politics, the mainspring of rhetoric in days when politics were taken more seriously than they are today. Although American undergraduates have not unseated ministries, they have always been articulate and energetic. The force of this statement may be shown by a reading of the minute books and records of college literary and debating societies from the moment of their founding. While the sometimes turbulent realism of their meetings, the sharp give and take, the comedy and pathos of youthful eloquence let loose upon a given theme is now lost to us, those minutes indicate what the student was thinking and talking about as the United States grew into a great nation. They reveal a source for American history in the making, too precious to remain entirely neglected.

In the Yandes Memorial Library at Wabash College, founded in 1832 at Crawfordsville, Indiana, there are filed two dozen dog-eared ledgers, the repository of almost all that is known of the early literary societies in that institution. They bore names that recalled the dominant classical influence of that period, stately and a bit pompous-Euphronean, Atlantian Literati, Calliopean, Lyceum, Philomathean, Columbian Institute, and, only slightly less magnificent, The Western Literary Society. Some of them flourished for a few years, undergoing successive avatars of reorganization or merging with other groups. None of them exist any longer. Most of the minutes are set down in a faultless calligraphy rare in our days. Each society had its appropriate Latin motto: Lyceum Society drew upon Horace, Epistles II, 2, 45, "inter silvas academi quaerere verum"; Calliopean Society preferred "libri cibus animo." The library indeed of Columbian Institute (for each society had its own collection of books, housed in its own hall) included in 1844 Gil Blas, Don Quixote, Shakespeare, Josephus, *The History of Redemption*, *Practical Piety*, *The Young Man's Guide*, *Master Key to Popery*, and Bulwer's novels.

Rules and regulations were rigid. Fines were levied on members for lack of performance, absence, walking about while a speaker held the floor, whispering, talking, leaning

against the wall, putting one's feet on the stove, using tobacco, or eating apples. Occasionally refreshments of lemonade were served; now and then the ladies were invited. Those delinquent in dues were often exposed to a scene such as this which occurred on March 29, 1844, in Euphronean Hall:

A brief journal as read by B. I. Dunn containing a notice of the treasurer to delinquent debtors which was heard amid repeated and deafening applause and was followed by a spirited and animated song in the melancholy chorus of which "Hark from the tombs a doleful sound" all the members enthusiastically joined. Then the society, after listening to a solo on the drum, proceeded to elect officers.

Sometimes unruly spirits broke the bonds of strict decorum and shocked the assembled gathering, as on July 17, 1844, when retribution fell upon a certain William Hamilton Lazarus Noble:

Mr. Montgomery offered the following motion, Whereas William Noble has at a meeting of this Society a short time previous to this used language unbecoming a gentleman, and whereas said Noble in the commencement of that meeting said that he knew nothing of the question then before the society and did not intend to vote and whereas, contrary to this declaration, the said Noble in a few minutes after took the floor and with foul mouthed accusations not only insulted the members of this society but violated one of its laws, to wit "That no gentleman shall use improper language in this Society"; therefore in view of these considerations, I move that William Hamilton Lazarus Noble be expelled from this society, which was adopted.

After such an ill-omened beginning, the meeting then fell to the discussion of such themes as these, strangely familiar to our machine age: "Should the Classics be discarded in our Academies and schools? Are professional men too numerous in our country?" or this one, still hotly debated by our major political parties: "Would it be good policy for posterity to be held responsible for the debts of their ancestors for a longer time than one age?" In the same year the speakers mulled over the proposition, "Ought there to be a Congress of Nations?"

On off-days, when interest in current affairs lagged or when the objectivity that history bestows upon events long since enacted seemed more desirable than partisan contemporary issues, the members discussed lofty problems of this sort: "Does the Poet exert a greater influence than the orator? Is our national character advancing in intelligence and virtue?" "Do savage nations possess a complete right to the soil? Was the execution of Mary Queen of Scots

justifiable?" This was a favorite topic; the tragic queen sometimes gave way to other figures, Louis XVIII, Charles I, or Robert Emmett; but the question was framed in the same terms.

Other questions gave rise to much ethical soul-searching and painful logic. What, after all, could a student debater in a tolerant and liberty-loving nation in the year 1844 say about the embarrassing questions: "Ought Congress to take any means to prevent the spread of Catholicism? Was it morally right for the American colonies to revolt from Great Britain? Does civilization increase happiness?" Who could successfully defend the affirmative on "Has War been beneficial to the world? Should a student in college cultivate the friendship of the ladies?" Consciences were intermittently troubled by the proposition, occurring as early as October 15, 1859: "Was the Mexican War of 1846 justifiable on the part of the U.S.?" And while the backbreaking toil of the pioneer farmer was a part of every student's experience, they could still gravely discuss a question that acutely troubles us today: "Are labor-saving machines beneficial?"

But it was the national issues of the time that stirred the debaters to surpass themselves; year by year, certain questions reflected the intense drama of history. The Euphronean Society in 1844 was disturbed by the challenge: "Should Texas be admitted to the Union?" and in 1848 the Lyceum Literary Society considered: "Would it be right to establish slavery in any territory that has lately been annexed or may be in the future? Should Congress support the Wilmot Proviso?" and anxiously inquired on May 25, 1849, "Will the discovery of the gold mines in California be more beneficial than injurious to this country?"

Throwing to the winds the jejune topics "Does the reading of novels injure the mind? Does the persecution of the sciences tend to retard their progress?" these tireless interrogators of the Delphic oracle turned on April 9, 1844, to grim realities with the query: "Is it probable that Texas will sustain her liberties?" and as the Civil War drew near, they asked in breathless succession: "Is the refusal of Northern States to obey the Fugitive Slave Law sufficient cause for a Southern Secession? Is Secession treason? Ought the Fugitive Slave Law to have been passed?"

Sober spirits attempted in vain to quiet fevered minds. With the nation plunged into conflict, Mr. Finch, of Lyceum Society, offered the following on September 13, 1861:

"Resolved that in the debates of the present term owing to the excited state of public feeling we abstain entirely from questions in which governmental policy on the war is concerned." It was taken up for immediate action and after a prodigious display of both eloquence and logic was lost. The society then proceeded to select a question to be debated next night and finally adopted the following: Can we reasonably expect to suppress the present rebellion?

The questions and resolutions came swiftly, this momentary threat to free speech having been thus averted, interest ran high. "Resolved that our National war vessel was justified in taking forcible possession of Mason and Slidell; Resolved that it would have been expedient for our government to have adopted Gen. Fremont's proclamation. Is the President's Emancipation expedient and good policy?" One may notice the emphasis upon expedience in these propositions. Objective ethical considerations were, by this time, secondary if not irrelevant. They were reserved for less troubled times, together with such mild academic puzzlers as "Did the Grecian games have a beneficial influence upon the Greek mind?"

As the war drew to its close, an ugly temper of vengeance gained expression among debaters now thinking of many of their comrades who lay dead on the battlefield or languished in Southern prisons. In 1865 proposals of this nature: "Should the government of the U.S. execute all Rebels above the rank of Brigadier General? Should General Sherman be relieved of his command? Should the returning rebels be represented in Congress? Should the conspirators against the life of our late President be tried by a civil court?" were the order of the day.

In the cycle of the seasons the speechmakers returned once more to the quiet garden of the ages and to less inspiring problems; in a mood of lofty resignation they were content to reconsider the well-worn theme: "Is woman the moving power in all the affairs of life?" The response which even this might still elicit can be measured by the tribute offered in the notes of one enthusiastic secretary: "One thought while drinking in the flames as they issued from the ardent eyes of the Grecian muse that he was e'en transported to that golden age when heaven-descended heroes extirpated all the woes of man and were chronicled by the muse in strains of surpassing eloquence and beauty." But in the twenty most continuously exciting years since the Revolution these devotees of the muses had bravely shouldered their country's burdens upon the creaking rostrum of the debating hall.