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LETTERS OF RUTGERS LITERARY CLUBS

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IN the first half of the last century two groups of Rutgers undergraduates, which had organized in 1826 as the Philoclean and the Peithessophian literary societies, acquired the competitive idea of attaching famous names to their rolls of honorary members. The motive, whatever else may be said of it, has supplied the University Library, with a collection of letters variously demonstrating, among other things, the ways which the nineteenth century could find for saying yes or no with grace and elegance.

But the collection, now in three bound volumes and a small box of folders, offers somewhat more than casual interest. There are 118 names to be found between 1826 and 1879 of Americans who played an influential part in an extremely critical period of the country. Of these, 47 may be selected as familiar to any student of American history whose knowledge extends beyond mere by-words. Their biographies provide a curiously illuminating background for the drama of historical events and conflicts gripping the nation at the time.

Six presidents had written letters to the Societies: John Quincy Adams, James Buchanan, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, John Tyler. Only Jackson and Taylor accepted mem-

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Robert Gosman Jun^r Secretary to the Philoclean Society
of Rutgers College - New Brunswick New Jersey

Meridian Hill
Washington 4 April 1829.

Sir

I have received your letter of the 27th
ult^o and accept with pleasure the appointment of honorary member
of the Philoclean Society, fully persuaded that its objects and pursuits
are of a nature creditable to its members, and useful to the members
of the College, who share in them.

Please to present to the Members of the Society, the Respects
and thanks of their fellow Citizen and fellow Student
John Quincy Adams.

Letter of John Quincy Adams to the Philoclean Society,
Rutgers University, April 4, 1829

bership while in the White House; only Adams accepted membership after his Presidency.

Yet other names, in addition to those in Professor Rudolf Kirk's *Journal* article in 1938, of perhaps equal significance, are among the Library's letters—names like William Bainbridge, whose naval career sounds like a dime novel; C. C. Cambreling, majority leader in the House of Representatives under Jackson and Van Buren; Donald G. Mitchell, known to readers as Ik Marvel; Henry James Raymond, founder of the *New York Times*; John Rogers, the Paterson man who built some of the earliest locomotives; Charles Sumner, the controversial Senator at the time of the secession question; Roger B. Taney, cabinet member and U. S. Chief Justice; and N. P. Willis, author and editor. In fact, all of the selected 118 names, which appear in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, are of the sort to arrest the interest of any student of the period and invite his further explorations.

There is no way of telling how many letters from the two societies went unanswered. But at times their choice of names exhibits an uncanny ability to anticipate fame. Many of the prominent figures achieved their renown a number of years after an invitation to address the society or to accept honorary membership. For example, the letter of Alexander H. Stephens, vice-president of the Confederacy, is dated November 4, 1857. At the time he was engaged in heated controversies in Congress.

How the societies chose their honorary members is not entirely clear. Ostensibly literary in purpose and interest, they nevertheless seem to have elicited replies from a vast number of clergymen, statesmen, political leaders, orators, scientific men, and capitalists. Only one painter, Thomas Hill, is to be found. There are no musicians.

The greatest number of letters were written from small towns of the region, like New Brunswick, Newark, Perth Amboy, or Bound Brook. There is mild amusement in the frequency with which the surname of the writer is that of a society member. Indeed, by far the most interesting and the most personal letters are written by men who are evidently surprised and even embarrassed by their election. They often deprecate the honor or try to justify it by a formal lecture on the importance of learning or oratory. Perhaps the prize for honesty and vigor should go to the New York grocer who could

not decide whether he was the victim of a joke or the beneficiary of a mistake, but who ended by offering the boys a discount on their groceries.

A fairly careful study of those letters which derive importance from the signatures, occasionally excised by autograph hunters, reveals that the letters themselves often bear important contents. It is hoped that this article will augment the information contained in the notes by Dr. Rudolf Kirk in the *Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, vol. I, no. 2, of June, 1938.

President John Quincy Adams, who had accepted Philoclean membership in a very shaky hand on April 4, 1829, declined on November 7, 1838, an invitation to speak, according to a "copy" in the Library files, candidly stating:

A precarious and unsteady state of health has for several years been accompanied by pulmonary weakness and a frequently failing voice, forbidding me to contract any Engagement to speak in public at any time in advance: I have accordingly been compelled to decline numerous invitations similar to that with which I am now honoured by you.

Many years before he became President, James Buchanan took the pains to explain (March 18, 1837) that he could not accept an invitation to give the annual Philoclean oration because "I have made arrangements to visit the West at that season of the year which I feel bound to perform." He had accepted an honorary membership on June 7, 1830.

Henry Clay declined membership on November 14, 1835, because "varied duties and occupations, public and private, distance of place, and advancing age will not allow me to accept the appointment, without sacrifices which I am sure you would not desire I should make."

Rather cautiously, J. Fenimore Cooper on November 29, 1833, pointed out that he had "no means of informing myself as to the nature of your association, but make no doubt it is one of those collegiate societies that train up the young men of our institutions to be worthy citizens, and as such I shall be proud to be enrolled on its list of members."

A curious feature of a day without typewriters appears in the letter, February 27, 1845, from Buffalo of a later President, Millard Fillmore. He gives his absence from Buffalo when Peithessophian's

letter arrived as grounds for "my apology for any apparent neglect in acknowledging the compliment." Then he apparently left a space not entirely filled by another hand, which inserted, "although declining the honor." The letter continues, expressing formal thanks, as if all had been decided in advance except the question of acceptance. One's curiosity is piqued as to why he delayed his decision and what swung him against acceptance. To cap the business, the signature has been excised, so that the possibility that the insertion may be in the handwriting of the signature can not be easily explored.

Occasionally conjecture on a man's personality is excited by a personal touch. William W. Folwell, in 1869 the first president of the University of Minnesota and an early advocate of the Junior College, wrote in 1857, "It's a glorious thing Mr. President Durand, to have friends. especially influential friends. Such, I am persuaded, I must have among your honorable members."

The Library's collection of letters offers an opportunity to hear the more intimate thinking on inconspicuous but prevailing questions. Some of the less well-known figures sometimes find the leisure to share their private opinions with the young men who they sense will attend to their words. William Bentley Fowle, who introduced music, calisthenics, and needlework into the schools, besides compiling fifty textbooks and publishing the *Common School Journal* after Horace Mann, wrote to the Philoclean Society in 1854:

The objects of your Society are among the most important that can occupy your attention, for, if there is any one respect in which the graduates of our colleges are deficient, it is in the art of Reading & Speaking. Of all the public speakers that I have heard, not one in fifty has any claim to the rank of a correct and effective orator. Nothing but the truths or the good sense contained in the lectures and sermons we hear has made them tolerable. . . . Not one in a hundred of our lawyers is free from ill habits. . . . I have suspected that this low state of the sublime art is owing to the custom common in our schools . . . of studying treatises of rhetoric instead of studying nature [I have examined] five or six thousand teachers, male and female, in reading, and I speak within bounds when I say, that not one in a thousand could read well enough to be a model for the imitation of children.

A Rutgers graduate, Frederick T. Frelinghuysen, wrote as Secretary of State under President Arthur in 1882, "It is very gratifying when walking in a busy and somewhat anxious path to receive con-

gratulations and good wishes from a Society, with which are associated most pleasant youthful memories.”

Literary figures are singularly sparing of personal information or ideas, but Fitz-Greene Halleck revealed that “a wound in my right hand has for some weeks past disabled me from writing. The very flattering compliment expressed in your letter is alike unexpected and undeserved. I have no claims for admission into the brotherhood of learning, save a life-long love of literature, and the highest respect for her votaries.”

Joseph Hopkinson, a jurist of Philadelphia who is now remembered best for his verses, “Hail, Columbia,” chose to lecture the Philoclean members on the subject of contributions. His letter of November 10, 1834, opened: “The calls upon us in the city for assistance to scientific, literary, and charitable institutions are so numerous, that even their best friends are compelled to be very moderate in their contributions & sometimes to refuse altogether. I beg you to accept the enclosed as evidence of my good-will to your exertions to increase your library.” He suggests, further, that they put their funds in the hands of some person who may obtain the best bargains in books.

The letter of John Pendleton Kennedy, author of *Horse-Show Robinson*, was one of those which combined humility with moralizing:

Somewhat of an apprentice to letters myself, . . . I pledge myself to you as an humble colabourer with you in the excellent purpose of cultivating a taste for literature and of infusing its flavour into the wide society of the republic. I am convinced that it is only through the influence of this spirit that our free institutions can be perpetuated, and that in the pursuit of knowledge we not only lay up a store of much personal happiness, but acquit ourselves also of the highest obligations we owe our country. The cause of patriotism, virtue, benevolence, and truth finds in such pursuits its best allies and surest defence. Let me hope that from our mutual zeal in this career we may make ourselves hereafter favourites with our country.

The president of Union College for sixty-two years, Eliphalet Nott, wrote to Peithessophian, “I am too remote from your institution and have to [*sic*] many official cares and duties here, and in this vicinity, to be of any use to your society by my presence or my contributions.” But he granted the society his well-wishes and his name.

It seems probable that the Library possesses a very valuable letter from John Randolph of Roanoke, as he was commonly known. The Virginia statesman, who died on May 24, 1833, wrote in the previous month, possibly on the second, a long letter explaining his illness and complaining bitterly of the national decline in morality. Fortunately, the predatory hand which cut up the envelope for an autograph spared the letter itself, including the signature, which is probably genuine:

Your letter, announcing my "unanimous Election as an honorary member of the '*Philoclean Society of Rutgers College*', has lain unanswered upon my Table since the 12th of December last on which day it was received by me at Roanoke. It bears date the first & is post-marked the 6th of that month. During this tedious Time I have been disabled by a cruel Disease from answering a very great number of letters, many of them on urgent business, & some of them of great consequence to my best Interests—pecuniary as well as of a higher character.

I seize the first moment which a favourable Change in my Disease affords to make to the Society a suitable acknowledgement of the Honour conferred upon me; & if unable to announce my "ready acceptance" I can at least give to the Society & to your self, Sir, it's [*sic*] President the sincere assurance of my cordial acknowledgement of the Honour. . . . Heretofore when I have been so fortunate as to procure an amanuensis I have been compelled to employ him in answering my most urgent Letters of business: &, when able to write myself, to employ all the leisure that I could procure in doing that which I could not trust except to a person of the highest & nicest sense of Honour. Such Characters—rare at all Times—were never more so than now when the Electioneering Principle—"bred in the Bone" of our Government has brought on an almost universal corruption & the State of Society & manners threatens to leave us nothing worth living for out of our immediate domestic circle & even there it's [*sic*] baleful influence is not unfelt. It has invaded the Fire-side & Friendships of long standing & supposed Inviolability have withered before it, like the *Simoom* of the Desert, blasting all that comes in it's [*sic*] way.

The letter is signed, "John Randolph of Roanoke."

The letter of January 27, 1851, from John Todd, Congressman, clergyman, and widely known author, is curiously personal in its graceful acceptance: "I am too vain a man & receive too few compliments of the kind to be able to decline such an honor, & in accepting of this I wish to assure the Society that my only regrets are that I cannot reflect honor back on them, & that I am not young enough to

enter upon the stage of life with them at a period of the world when the call for labor, toil, manly deeds, mental efforts, & moral achievement are louder & more frequent than at any former period of the world."

A. C. Van Raalte, a minister who led his followers from Holland, "like a modern Moses," to found a town and Hope College in Michigan, took the trouble to write a long, prayerful letter in the spirit of a sermon, evidently animated by a feeling of responsibility for the moral growth of his correspondents in the Philoclean Society. There is an occasional suspicion of a Dutch accent, however, in such phrases as "I am sorrow that I am herein not more profitable."

Perhaps the most remarkable career represented is that of N. M. Alexander Vattermore, who started as a ventriloquist of note and became an important promoter of an international system of book exchange and one of the founders of the Boston Public Library. His letter reflects his deep concern with his work in 1850:

It is with feelings of the deepest gratitude that I accept the honored title you are presenting me in the name of the Society you preside, if any thing, Sir, could increase my love and devotion towards your beautiful country and her kind and hospitable inhabitants, it would certainly be this additional token of esteem bestowed by citizens of New-jersey upon the humble advocate and missionary of the system of intellectual union of nations.

He has, he says, sent to the Governor, five works (essentially theological) to be deposited in the Rutgers Library "or your own." He adds that "this mode has been considered the best adapted to award these pledges, of fraternity from nation to nation, against those dangers which so very often threaten the most useful private establishments, as well as means to secure to scientific corporations the official support and sympathy of the legislature and executive of their respective State."

Henry A. Wise, a Congressman, Governor of Virginia, and Confederate General, wrote to Philoclean on February 13, 1836, an elaborate message concerning the importance of learning to patriotism. On February 5, 1837, he followed with his apologies for not being able to give the annual oration, and closed with some observations on the same theme as in the previous letter. But in the second letter he mentions "my clear conviction of the duties which *men of letters now* owe, especially in reference to certain empirical influ-

ences at work in the present times, to this *mighty* country—mighty for much *evil* as well as good.”

Twenty-one of the 47 prominent people, and 48 (marked with an asterisk) of the complete selected list given below had occasion to express sentiments of more than routine interest.

John Quincy Adams, President, Apr. 4, '29, Nov. 7, '38*; William Bainbridge, naval hero, Oct. 7, '29; Thomas K. Beecher, brother of Henry Ward Beecher, Oct. 6, '63*; Thomas H. Benton, statesman, Dec. 15, '36*; W. Macpherson Berrien, statesman, Attorney-General, Jan. 24, '29; John Bigelow, editor, author, diplomat, Dec. 15, '42; Robert (Montgomery?) Bird, novelist and dramatist, June 12, '38*; William C. Bouck, politician, Governor N.Y., Nov. 12, '40*; David P. Brown, orator and poet, Mar. 29, '35*, Apr. 22, '35; Samuel R. Brown, missionary and founder of Elmira College, Jan. 1, '56; William Cullen Bryant, poet and editor, Nov. 13, '32, Dec. 3, '32*; James Buchanan, President, June 7, '39, Mar. 18, '37*; Samuel D. Burchard, clergyman, creator of phrase “rum, Romanism, rebellion,” Jan. 22, '52; Benjamin F. Butler, General, Governor Mass., Jan. 27, '31; John C. Calhoun, statesman, July 5, '29; C. C. Cambreling, political leader and Minister to Russia, Nov. 28, '31, Dec. 4, '32; Rufus Choate, lawyer and statesman, Jan. 13, '45; L. Gaylord Clark, editor, Feb. 7, '53, Feb. 9, '53; Henry Clay, statesman, Nov. 14, '35*; John M. Clayton, Secretary of State, June 27, '31*; Samuel L. Clemens, author, Dec. 17, '79; George H. Cook, geologist and founder Rutgers Agricultural College, Oct. 5, '53; James Fenimore Cooper, novelist, Nov. 29, '33*; Ezra Cornell, founder of Cornell University and Western Union, Jan. 7, '67; Erastus Corning, railroad magnate, Dec. 6, '53; William H. Crawford, Minister to France, Secretary of War, March 31, '30; J. J. Crittenden, statesman, Attorney-General, June 26, '36; Caleb Cushing, statesman, Mar. 29, '39; Thomas L. Cuyler, clergyman and popular writer, Dec. 15, '53*, May 28, '66; Charles Daveis, agent in border dispute, June 21, '51; John A. Dix, General, Secretary of Treasury, Feb. 7, '49*; R. Ogden Doremus, chemist and inventor of arc light, founder of New York Philharmonic, May 18, '53*; John W. Draper, scientist and historian, May 17, '53; Peter S. DuPonceau, Revolutionary soldier, authority on law, history, languages, Nov. 21, '29; Charles Eames, lawyer, diplomat, editor, Mar. 1, '41; Thomas A. Edison, inventor, Nov. 5, '79; Edward Everett, orator, Nov. 16, '31, Feb. 15, '53; Millard Fillmore, President, Feb. 27, '45*; Hamilton Fish, statesman, Mar. 8, '33, Nov. 20, '47; William W. Folwell, first president University of Minnesota, historian, Sept. 30, '57*; William B. Fowle, pioneer educator, Oct. 19, '54*; Frederick Theodore Frelinghuysen, U.S. Senator, Secretary of State, Feb. 7, '82*; Theodore Frelinghuysen, chancellor, N. Y. U.; vice-presidential candidate, president Rutgers, June 3, '28, Mar. 25, '31*; William Gaston, politician and jurist, Dec. 29, '36; John B. Gibson, jurist, Nov. 16, '32; Francis Granger, politician, Postmaster General, June 23, '31, Mar. 20, '33*, Mar. 9, '35*; Horace Green, first specialist in throat diseases, July 5, '53; Robert C. Grier, associate justice Supreme Court, July 8, '44; E. D. Griffin, founder American Bible Society, president Williams, Oct. 24, '32; B. R. Hall, author of books on the West, Jan. 22, '52; Fitz-Greene Halleck, author, Dec. 3, '32*, Jan. 27, '35; Alexander Hamilton, Jr., July 22, '50; Joel T. Headley, author, historian, Jan. 2, '46; Caleb S. Henry, clergyman, educator, author, Nov. 11, '40*; Joseph Henry, physicist, Feb. 8, '33; Thomas Hill, painter, Jan. 29, '51; Ogden Hoffman, criminal lawyer, May 30, '29; Mark Hopkins, college president, Aug. 2, '41; Joseph Hopkinson, jurist and author of “Hail, Columbia,” Nov. 19, '31, Nov. 10, '34*; Charles J. Ingersoll, political leader, May 19, '35; Washington Irving, author, June 12, '32; Alfred Iverson, Senator, Confederate General, Feb. 3, '54; Andrew Jackson, President, May 14, '29*; John P. Kennedy, author, Oct. 24, '36, Mar. 20, '52*; William B. Kinney, editor and diplomat, Feb. 20, '37; Abbott Lawrence, merchant, manufacturer, Nov. 18, '47; Edward Livingston, Secretary of State and

Minister to France, Jan. 14, '32; Henry W. Longfellow, poet, May 23, '45; John McLean, Postmaster General and jurist, Jan. 27, '37*; John McVickar, economist, Mar. 8, '33*; William J. MacNevin, Irish patriot, physician, author, and founder Rutgers Medical School, June 4, '28; Horace Mann, educator, Dec. 19, '46, June 19, '50; Matthew F. Maury, oceanographer, officer Confederate navy, Oct. 16, '48; Donald G. Mitchell, author ("Ik Marvel"), Mar. 7, '52; Ely Moore, labor leader and Congressman, Feb. 15, '42; David Murray, Rutgers professor, adviser to Japanese government, historian, Jan. 27, '57, Mar. 3, '64*; John L. Nevius, missionary, author, June 14, '33, Feb. 1, '66; Eliphalet Nott, college president, inventor, temperance lecturer, May 27, '51*; Alonzo Potter, bishop, Nov. 16, '41, July 8, '51; Horatio Potter, bishop, July 12, '41*; William C. Preston, orator, friend of Washington Irving, May 26, '34, July '44*; Rodman M. Price, naval officer, Governor N.J., Dec. '53; John V. L. Pruyn, Congressman, director railroads and insurance companies, July 27, '33*; John Randolph of Roanoke, statesman (died May '33), April 2, '33*; Henry James Raymond, founder N.Y. *Times*, June 20, '54; John Rogers, pioneer builder of locomotives, Dec. 12, '50; James Rush, physician, psychologist, Nov. 6, '33, Mar. 20, '35*; Philip Schaff, biblical scholar and church historian, June 14, '58; Julius H. Seelye, president Amherst, creator "Amherst Plan," philosopher, Congressman, June 28, '56; John Sergeant, politician and lawyer, Dec. 9, '28; William H. Seward, statesman, Feb. 25, '35*, Feb. 6, '39; John Sherman, U. S. Senator, Secretary of Treasury, Jan. 25, '60, Nov. 3, '79; Morgan L. Smith, General, July 29, '42; Samuel L. Southard, Cabinet member and Governor N.J., Jan. 8, '27, June 25, '33*, Apr. 21, '35*, Dec. 3, '50; Jared Sparks, historian, Sept. 2, '34*; Ambrose Spencer, politician, Oct. 3, '33; Alexander H. Stephens, vice-president Confederacy, Nov. 4, '57; Charles Stewart, naval hero, July 28, '33; Thomas H. Stockton, clergyman, Oct. 11, '39; Alfred B. Street, poet, Jan. 20, '51; Charles Sumner, statesman, Dec. 16, '46; Roger B. Taney, Attorney-General, Secretary of Treasury, U. S. Chief Justice, July 20, '30; Zachary Taylor, President, Jan. 30, '50; William M. Thackeray, English novelist, Dec. 2, '52; John Todd, author, Jan. 27, '51*; Martin Farquhar Tupper, English author, Apr. 8, '51*; John Tyler, President, Nov. 21, '40; A. C. Van Raalte, founder of Hope College, Dec. 1, '56*; N. M. Alexander Vattmore, ventriloquist, founder of international book exchange and Boston Library, Nov. 8, '50*; Charles Wadsworth, possibly the friend of Emily Dickinson, June 10, '54; Jonathan M. Wainwright, naval hero, Mar. 22, '47*; Robert J. Walker, Secretary of Treasury, Governor Kansas Territory, July 8, '36*, Oct. 24, '45; Daniel Webster, statesman, Dec. 17, '30, Nov. 11, '42; Noah Webster, lexicographer, Nov. 28, '33; N. P. Willis, editor and author, '50; Robert C. Winthrop, statesman and biographer, Feb. 14, '40, Dec. 16, '40*; Henry A. Wise, Governor Virginia, Confederate General, Feb. 13, '36*, Feb. 5, '37*; Silas Wright, political leader, June 3, '44(?).