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INVENTING THE "TIME-HONORED TRADITIONS" OF "OLD RUTGERS": RUTGERS STUDENT CULTURE, 1858-1900

BY MICHAEL MOFFATT

Dr. Moffatt is Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences,
Rutgers University at New Brunswick

IN THE early nineteenth century, Rutgers students were a generally untroublesome lot, most of whom seemed to think of college in the same way as their elders did: as a place to become a cultivated, educated "young gentleman." Though they indulged in pranks, acted up in classes, and regularly got in trouble with the faculty, they rarely caused major problems for the institution, and when they did—as in the attempt of a student group to legislate against "tale-bearers" to the faculty in 1835, firmly opposed by the college—they quickly backed down. Their extracurricular activities are remarkable by later standards. Like early nineteenth-century American college students everywhere else, they gave their affection and enthusiasm to the "literary society," a remarkable institution in which students provided themselves with the education the college wouldn't, or couldn't: practice in English composition, in oratory; access to wide-ranging libraries of current literature;¹ practice in political skills; polishing of etiquette and composure; cultivating of friendships of value in later life. They enjoyed being in college but their interests rarely focussed on the college. "College loyalty" was unheard of; college sports, college songs and other, later rituals

¹ See Francis A. Johns, 1982, "A Peithessophian Society Library Catalogue of 1834," *Journal of the Rutgers University Library* 44:95-107.

of college life simply did not exist (or were quiet, informal, boylike pleasures which students rarely publicized).

All this began to change in the late 1850s, when, in a remarkable decade or so (again, paralleling student cultural developments in other American colleges), a very different mentality developed among Rutgers students: a concept of college as a world in itself, with its own customs, ceremonies and iconography; a concept of the student as a unique, fun-loving sort of youth; and a notion of the college experience centering on extracurricular activities rather than on academics or intellectual education. This new collegiate ideal was entirely student created, and lasted, with some ups and downs, until about 1900. I would like to describe it in greater detail here, working to some degree in the past as an anthropologist works in the present—trying to reconstruct the lived-in social world of a small, face-to-face community, on the basis of the rich primary documents on nineteenth century student life which survive in Rutgers University Libraries.² I will also suggest some possible explanations for this change after the late 1850s, but since I am not a historian by training, my explanations should be taken more tentatively than my description.

Groundwork for changing student culture was laid in the late 1840s, when the first of the new “fraternal organizations” came to Rutgers—Delta Phi in 1845, followed by Zeta Psi in 1848. It is much harder to determine what went on in the fraternities than in the literary societies, for they were secret to a degree much more extreme than the literary societies (which have left 29 boxes of documents in the Rutgers archives). And that was precisely the point; their profounder secrecy (propped up by a more elaborate, Masonically-based ritual system) made them impervious to adult control in ways older student organizations never had been, an imperviousness they proceeded to underline by surviving and flour-

² This article is based on the primary documents in the Department of Special Collections and Archives, Rutgers University Libraries: alumni biographical files, other alumni documents, personal letters, diaries, broadsheets, scrapbooks, student publications (*Targum*, *Scarlet Letter* and others), faculty and trustees’ minutes, trustees’ papers, minutes of the literary societies, official publications of the college and other documents. It is also based on Richard P. McCormick’s excellent and comprehensive institutional history, *Rutgers: a Bicentennial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966). Thanks to Dr. McCormick, and to John Gillis, James McLachlan and Jim Reed, for scholarly help. Thanks also to Ron Becker, Maxine Miller, Ed Skipworth and Ferenc Varga for help with the Rutgers documents.

ishing during 15 years of attempted suppression by the college, which banned them between 1847 and 1862. Students undoubtedly got the message.

By the late 1850s, a new mood of aggressiveness and assertiveness was discernible among Rutgers students. Older student publications had reflected the interests of the literary societies in the wider political and philosophical issues of the day, as well as general student lack of interest in the college. In 1858, the first of a new set of college-centered student publications, the *Rutgers College Quarterly*, was founded, with a quite different set of values: to “express the free and easy side of student life” and to lobby for issues on which students had strong opinions. In the initial issue, the student editors were against evening chapel, they were tired of literary society-sponsored Commencement orators, and they were for a more practical curriculum and for more college songs. In 1859, the *Quarterly* was almost suppressed for its publication of a scathing and very funny parody of the faculty, which represented the President as a sanctimonious bore, the Professor of Mathematics as schizoid, and the entrance exams in Greek as a total farce. Also in 1859, the faculty minutes reported an “outrage” performed in the chapel one night, apparently vandalism of one of the pews. Earlier student pranks had attacked more innocent emblems of the college: the bell, the latrines; this one went after the traditional sacred heart of the old religious school, the chapel.

Students’ own self-organization also began to change in the late 1850s. Earlier, students had organized their identities in terms of which of the two literary societies they belonged to. As the societies lost their grip, some students shifted loyalties to the fraternities, but the fraternities (unlike the societies) did not include everyone. A new, global subdivision began to acquire centrality in student culture: the college class. The late 1850s were perhaps the first time an age-graded sense of college class *could* develop, as young men increasingly came to Rutgers at a standard age (due to developments in secondary education); earlier college classes had been highly age-heterogenous, often containing youths as young as 13 and adults as old as 30 in a single class. In 1859, the classes first adopted mottos, and the following year they began to develop senior classbooks (which turned into the senior yearbook, the *Scarlet Letter*, thirteen years later). And starting in the late 1850s, the Rutgers classes

began to develop—remarkably quickly—new rituals to express their new solidarities and to act out their new values, often borrowing these rituals from students at other colleges, communicating with one another through the exchange of college publications.

One set of new interclass practices involved all the members of a given class collectively in a set of balanced antagonisms with members of other classes: interclass baseball, first played in 1860; “rushing,” assaults by the sophomores on the incoming freshmen, especially on their pretensions to the symbols of adult status—the “cane rush,” first practiced in 1864, and the “hat rush” in the 1870s; “hazing,” midnight attacks on unpopular freshmen by groups of sophomores, first noted in the late 1860s; and an elaborating set of interclass “rakes” (spoofs), rushes and athletic contests in the 1870s and 1880s. An anthropologist is not needed to explicate the function of these practices; student ideologues were quite explicit, from the beginning, about their status as rites of passage in the newly structured student world. Early student editorials explained that hazing and rushing quickly taught the incoming freshman his place in the age-graded college class structure, taught him to rely on his class peers, and taught him the new collegiate values. Student folk theory of the functions of rites of passage mentioned every hypothesis conventionally ascribed to them by anthropologists, including “catharsis”; these activities served as a “safety valve” for the “animal spirits” of young men, according to student editorial opinion. Interclass ritual was reinforced by parliamentary procedure: from the late 1860s, the classes met regularly, usually under a tree with their class numerals carved on it, where they planned their activities and elected class officers. And from the late 1860s, student publications talked more and more about a new value, never mentioned before the Civil War: “class spirit.”

Another set of new student rituals in the 1860s were also usually practiced by the college classes but expressed something else: increasing student hostility toward formal academic values and toward the faculty; the increasingly strident student claim that the point of college was its evolving extracurricular world, *not* classes and studies. In 1860, the first “slope” was mentioned in the faculty minutes, when all the members of a class simply got up and left a given professor’s instructional room (at this era of a single mandatory curriculum, everyone in a single college class attended the same

teaching class together). “Slope” was a gravitational metaphor; students simply trickled away downhill, the metaphor suggested, away from the college. In 1861, college documents first mentioned the “Callithumpian serenade,” a charivari-like nighttime assault with raucous music, on the house of an unpopular faculty member. And sometime in the 1860s, the sophomores initiated the “cremation,” a midnight burning and mock-burial—with parody of church ceremonial—of their least favorite book. Before the 1860s, students gave their greatest admiration to those of their peers who won academic honors and spoke at graduation and other “exhibitions.” After the 1860s, the all-around “good guy” was most admired (the “brick” in the British-derived slang of the 1870s), and, increasingly, the athlete. In 1916, a member of the Rutgers class of 1868 remembered somewhat sanctimoniously that, in his undergraduate days, “we held the college life in high esteem, and properly condemned merely class-room success and high marks and any currying favor with professors to that end.”

A third set of student values developed in the 1860s: *college spirit*. Here, the student rituals were intercollegiate athletics; athleticism developed rapidly just prior to the Civil War, as it became increasingly “manly” for middle-class college youths to play sports (the pre-Civil War evaluation of sports had, on the contrary, made it a childlike and common activity not suitable for “young gentlemen”). In 1866 a Rutgers baseball team had been trounced by Princeton; the celebrated “Original Football Game” in 1869, a soccer-like affair, was an attempt at revenge. Rutgers took one of two games, its last win over Princeton until 1938. Also in 1869, Rutgers students adopted scarlet as the college color, originally because it was the only color easily available to them, later by intricate historical argument. Intercollegiate sports multiplied rapidly in the late nineteenth century, entirely student initiated and student run; there were no paid, professional, adult coaches at Rutgers until after World War I. Despite Rutgers’ generally modest success in late nineteenth-century intercollegiate athletics, Rutgers athletes and fans were known for their fanaticism; the phrase “I’d die for dear old Rutgers,” uttered by an injured football player in the 1890s, became widely symbolic of college loyalty in the early twentieth century. College spirit was also expressed by the celebrated “Cannon War” of 1875, when Rutgers students snuck down to

Princeton and swiped a cannon of dubious proprietorship and hid it from counterattacking Princeton students—with connivance from local New Brunswick authorities—and a Rutgers-Princeton faculty peace committee had to intervene. And a third expression of college spirit was the Glee Club, organized in the 1870s, and a large body of college songs written in the 1870s and 1880s, often as minor adaptations of older songs (e. g., “On the Banks of the Old Raritan,” an 1874 adaptation of “On the Banks of the Old Dundee”).

Since the 1850s, everyone at Rutgers had felt the need to promote the college; like other small schools, Rutgers was student-poor at a time when a minority of young men went to college, and it was in tough competition with other schools. Without feelings of strong alumni loyalty, the college’s endowments were especially dismal. When the students refounded their newspaper at the *Targum* after the Civil War, they declared that it was beneath the “dignity” of the faculty to act as “professional drummers” and recruit students from secondary schools. The new editors of the *Targum* volunteered students as Rutgers’ publicists and dedicated the *Targum* to “interests of Rutgers college.” The gesture was apparently heartfelt, but it was also clever; it disarmed growing criticism of the new disrespectfulness of the students, and it located students as the crucial ideologues of “college life” for the next forty years. College authorities did not have the wit to start writing their own version of Rutgers, in other publications, until after 1910. It is not surprising, then, that in the later years of the nineteenth century, an increasingly youth-centered, anti-academic image of college life prevailed.

Between 1865 and 1867, as Rutgers enrollments recovered from their near collapse during the Civil War, the incidence of student disturbances in the college went up alarmingly; faculty minutes indicate an average of eight collective disturbances a year, in a student body of little over 100: slopes, callithumps, vandalism, firecrackers, mass stamping in chapel, and the climax of the 1860s: the assault on the campus fence in 1867. For a year or so, the literary societies had petitioned the faculty in vain to install a gate in the campus fence near Van Nest hall, where the societies met (at the present exit from the Old Queens block, between Van Nest and Winants). One night in February, a large student mob (at least 35 and possibly 70 students) took matters into their own hands and removed the problem by tearing down the fence. When an initial

faculty investigation discovered the names of only six students involved—for whom suspensions were likely—a senior, later a “respected trustee of the college,”³ presented a petition signed by himself and 76 other students, all of whom deplored the partial justice and claimed equal responsibility. Further faculty investigation put the blame on thirty-four of these students, throwing a few out of the college and fining or warning others.

Though the campus fence uprising was ostensibly about the rights of the literary societies, the real issue was student rights (for the literary societies were rapidly waning at the time). The riot represented an action by almost all the students against college authority; the 77 names on the petition amounted to 75% of the students enrolled at Rutgers in 1867, and over 90% of the students likely to have been in town that night. The names of the identified perpetrators center on the sophomore class; the attack might have been a sophomore class enterprise to which other students attached themselves (in class stereotypes, sophomores were the “wildest”). But almost all students supported the attack, including a number of the preclergy living in Hertzog Hall; young men destined for the clergy had traditionally been trusted by college authorities to act less rowdily than other youths. The only student holdouts appear to have been the highminded youths in Delta Upsilon, then the “anti-secret society” in opposition to the fraternities, led by William Elliot Griffis, later a prominent educational missionary to Japan and alumnus.⁴ When Griffis subsequently proposed in his literary society that identified student culprits be admonished by the society (as was traditional in the societies), his motion did not carry. The college apparently held out on the gate for a number of years longer. The college was so student-poor that it could not afford to expel its clients for long, however; most of the expelled students were readmitted within a few months.

From the 1870s through the 1890s, the new, youth-centered view of college life continued to flourish at Rutgers, as the students elaborated the rituals and the ideology of their new world. College class stereotypes were one expression of the new values; adapting older “Ages of Man” iconography, student image makers repre-

³ See McCormick, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁴ Griffis' papers, a valuable resource for the study of the first years of Japan's “westernization,” are in the Special Collections of Rutgers University.

sented college as a place where *all* of maturation occurred: the freshman was an infant, the sophomore an errant youth, the junior a sexually-centered young man and the senior a mature man-of-the-world.⁵ Another expression of college as a world in itself were lengthy lexicons of student slang, new words which an incoming student had to learn in order to be understood by other students, and in order to mask his meaning from the uninitiated outsider. One list published in the *Targum* in 1871 gave 43 such terms; another, published in 1874, listed 80. The most developed subset of these terms categorized types of collegiate-age males (“flat, a fellow of no extraordinary ability”; “scull digger, one who tries to pull wool over another’s eyes”). A smaller subset applied to young women (“duck, a girl with drooping eyelids”; “my pink, a pretty girl”). A third referred to new collegiate practices (“buzz, to interview and ‘sound’ a man”). And a fourth deliberately defined one opaque word with another opaque word (“ku-klux, ‘nary a red,’ this used in the negative”; “lealligog, to fool about, to ‘come it,’ over a man”). The term “Targum” itself was deliberately opaque. An ancient languages teacher had introduced the term to Rutgers students in the late 1860s, saying it meant a “paraphrase” from one language into another. The students understood the idea of a paraphrase, and applied it first to the cheat-sheets they smuggled into language classes, and later to their new newspaper.

In the 1870s and 1880s, the new student values generated criticism from adults both in the college and in the town of New Brunswick (also increasingly subject to student depredations); why should privileged young men, it was asked, think they had special “rights” to be juvenile and disorderly? Student ideologues struck back by referring increasingly to the idea of “tradition”: the new practices of Rutgers student culture, they said, were in fact memorable schoolboy “traditions.”

How could they make such an argument, given the fact that many of these “traditions” had developed within the previous ten or twenty years? One reason is the short collective memory of the college student, for whom “freshman year” is often “long ago.” Another is an old theory in nineteenth-century American higher

⁵ For an example of this student iconography, see Michael Moffatt, *The Rutgers Picture Book: An Illustrated History of Student Life in the Changing College and University* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), p. 57.

education, that “boys” who lived together in monastic-like arrangements, in medieval European or contemporary British colleges, would be prone to certain antisocial behaviors:

“This doctrine of special privileges [for students] can be traced back to those ‘dark ages’ whence so many undesirable things have come down. Progress has skimmed off much of the scum of human vagaries, but some bits still float . . .” (*Targum*, 1870).

And:

“Students are great sticklers for old customs . . . certain precedents are always followed . . . certain rules and customs handed down from class to class [seem] . . . as unchangeable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians” (*Targum*, 1878).

Whatever the reasons for the claim, increasingly in the 1870s and 1880s the most criticized of the new student practices—rushing, hazing and nighttime depredations—were referred to by students as “time-honored traditions,” and by after 1900, virtually everyone at Rutgers seems to have accepted the claim. At Rutgers as elsewhere, late nineteenth-century student culture, a very specific, deliberately invented set of institutions, became the “traditional” college life of twentieth-century alumni memory.

Why did this new student culture develop at Rutgers when it did? What does its development tell us more generally about American history and the history of American collegiate youth? Historians generally relate the change to a changing set of national values in the late nineteenth century, when the nation transformed itself from a rural society (in which the “educated gentlemen” produced by antebellum education had prestigious roles as lawyers, doctors and clergymen in American small towns) to a dynamic, business centered urban society (in which the fraternity-go-getter, the campus politician, had a clearer road to success). In these terms, what is surprising about Rutgers is how early the changes started among the students, well before the onset of the Civil War. The Civil War, in fact, had no discernible impact either on the timing of changes or on the forms they took; military imagery was strikingly absent from student ritual in the late nineteenth century. The proportion of pre-clergy to other students in the Rutgers undergraduate population declined slowly and continuously throughout the century; there is no major hiatus in the 1850s to correlate with the

rapidly changing student values at the time. The increasing age-homogeneity of the college classes does seem to be a new factor in the late 1850s, and a general expansion in the size of the college, from less than a hundred undergraduates before the Civil War, to the two hundred or so average of most post-Civil War years—and the associated development of four balanced college classes to play these games with one another (the pre-Civil War college had been mostly sophomores, juniors and seniors, with few freshmen). Diffusion of British schoolboy philosophy—especially the model in *Tom Brown's School Days*, the redefinitions of sports, and the ideology of “manliness”—clearly also played a role in the changes. And the rigidity of the nineteenth century curriculum, with its increasingly irrelevant classical education, had to have had some relation to growing student anti-intellectualism. Rutgers was especially slow to change, instituting elective courses only toward the very end of the century.

One factor that does not correlate with the changes is dormitory construction. Authorities in the impoverished antebellum college could not afford to build dorms, so most students boarded in downtown New Brunswick or lived at home. American college policy makers in the early and mid-nineteenth century were also ethically adverse to dormitories, on the theory that the “morals” of young men declined in them. What is striking about the changes described here, however, is that they occurred without dormitory construction; Rutgers students constructed this highly communal, collective world while living scattered all over the map. In fact, it could be argued that the first dorm construction at Rutgers, in the 1890s, foreshadowed new forms of suppression of student culture, for increasingly after the 1890s, Rutgers authorities had students under their own roofs, under their own eyes.

Whatever else we make of it, late nineteenth-century students are an interesting example of *engaged* youths, at least as active and influential in the history of the college as the student activists of more recent years. What they invented may not seem especially lofty, but it was theirs and they loved it; far and away, the fondest reminiscences of college life appear in the early twentieth century, remembering this period. The image of “college fun” at the heart of late nineteenth-century student culture was also an important

drawing card for new college students in the early and mid-twentieth century, when college became so much more a mass phenomenon.

The other side of the coin, however, is that, to some degree, late nineteenth-century Rutgers students (like students elsewhere) juvenilized themselves, invented their own irresponsible adolescence and justified the development of the more effective means of student control (Deans!) that developed in the early twentieth century. The 1850s Rutgers student worried about being “respectable” and “adult,” and applied his mind, in the literary societies, to the most important issues of the day. The 1890s Rutgers student seems to have been typified by the student diarist Horace Hawes, who rarely studied and put most of his time into the *Targum*, sports, fraternity and sociability with friends. Typical entries from Hawes diary: “Fooling in Roost’s room and Hoagy kicked the table over and busted Roost’s lamp . . . More fun than a goat!” “Sloped college today. Monked around much! Ellis had a whole slew of Trenton girls up here . . . and we all had to hang around and chin ’em.” “I am now an alumnus. Rah! Rah! Rah! Bow! Wow! Wow! [a Rutgers football cheer].” Rah!

In the 1890s, a Rutgers president tried to invent joint faculty-student governance of Rutgers student life, to encourage the students to cooperate in dejuvenilizing themselves. But some students themselves actually doubted whether the system would work: “cooperative self-government [is] . . . an ideal system [and] demands ideal students. . . .” In 1901, a *Targum* editorial called for the appointment of a “cool, clear-hearted, tactful dean,” and in the rapidly growing college, with its rapidly growing administration, new, more modern forms of student culture—and control of students—began to evolve. The “traditions,” however, were periodically remembered, and mourned, in pages of the *Targum* down to the 1960s. In the late 1960s, the anti-elitist nationwide youth movement resulted in their final demise everywhere, including Rutgers (where freshman dress had survived into the mid-1960s), and today, they seem largely irrelevant to student concerns in a massive, bureaucratic university.