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marked it was better to confiscate a fortune than to marry it.¹²⁶ Actually he did none of these, but all have become part of the Butler legend. This legend helped to win him enemies and to magnify his faults.

When stripped of their more dramatic overtones Butler's weaknesses were those of the typical Northern politician, businessman, and amateur soldier. In the field he was by no means a blundering incompetent; his record was average in the far from spectacular list of Union generals. On the purely tactical level his political career was carried forward by the same methods as those of other Congressmen and lawyers. His willingness to accept contraband trade and the spoils system as necessary and even desirable facts of life was common to political and business circles throughout the North. Although he had his full share of the failings of "The Gilded Age," Butler did possess a robust enthusiasm for new and unpopular causes which often put him well ahead of his contemporaries. His originality and grasp of the higher strategies of war and legislation contributed to his success as an administrator and politician. These successes made substantial contribution to the preservation of the Union and the advancement of social justice.

¹²⁶ *Butler's Book*, 579-580, 538-41, 379-82; Hoar, I, 343-4.



BEN BUTLER AT COLBY COLLEGE

By ERNEST C. MARRINER

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN BUTLER was born in Deerfield, New Hampshire, in 1818, the son of a captain in the War of 1812, who became a merchant trader, voyaging to the West Indies and South America, and dying of yellow fever at St. Kitts, before any of his three children had reached their teens. The impoverished mother moved her family to Lowell, where she kept a boardinghouse and received help from the parish of the Reverend Enoch Freeman's Baptist church. Both Freeman and Mrs. Butler hoped that Ben would become a minister.

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When Ben was sixteen years old, he persuaded his mother to help him seek a military career. Reluctant as she may have been to abandon her ministerial ambition for her son, Mrs. Butler rounded up references and made a personal appeal to Congressman Caleb Cushing to appoint Ben to West Point. The Congressman coldly informed her that there were no vacancies in his district and that he had others on his waiting list.

The Reverend Mr. Freeman assured Mrs. Butler that it was all for the best. Ben could now attend a good Baptist college and become a minister. Expenses were low and instruction was good, said Mr. Freeman, at the Baptist college in Waterville, Maine, where his friend Rufus Babcock had just succeeded Jeremiah Chaplin as president.

When Ben Butler enrolled at Waterville College, in the fall of 1834, he had not quite reached his seventeenth birthday, and he weighed only 92 pounds. When he graduated four years later his weight had still not reached a hundred pounds. His biographer, Robert Holzman, says he was "a smallish youth, infirm in health, of fair complexion, with reddish brown hair."

According to Butler's own autobiography, he was a leading college prankster who spent much time trying to outwit the faculty. He told how he had pleaded to be excused from attending chapel on the ground that, since the Calvinist doctrine of predestination taught that the ratio of the saved to the damned was small, and that certainly the faculty must all be among the saved, his chance of being within the elect was so small that no amount of chapel attendance would do him any good. He boasted that he stole signs and gates, pigs and chickens, tied the clapper of the college bell, escaped expulsion by the skin of his teeth, and declared he received his diploma only because the faculty were glad to get rid of him. According to Ben himself, he was in college the "hell-raiser" his later contemporaries accused him of being in public life. But what kind of a person was he really like during his college career?

Public information about Ben Butler during these years comes chiefly from his own pen. Admittedly he was an aged man when his autobiography called *Butler's Book* came from the press of A. M. Thayer and Company in Boston in 1892. Possibly time had erased some memories, enhanced others, and

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even caused a few figments of imagination now to appear as historical fact.

The one college episode which the autobiography discusses at length is his attempt to be excused from chapel attendance. He says,

I therefore sent a petition to the President, couched in the most modest and most carefully chosen language I could command. It was easy to foresee the result of addressing such a paper to a conscientious body of men thoroughly imbued with the belief that what I claimed was little if any short of blasphemy.

At that time the records of the faculty, called the Executive Government of the College, were carefully kept. Whenever a petition reached them—and the President was required by regulations of the Trustees to lay all such papers before the assembled group—the substance of the petition and sometimes even its complete text was placed in the record. Between 1834 and 1838, when Ben Butler was one of its students, no such petition as the autobiography described is mentioned. It made a neat story to tell more than fifty years later, when an old statesman of many a stormy political scene was writing his reminiscences. Perhaps something like it may have happened, but so complete are the faculty records on other matters that we must register an honest doubt.

So persistent was the legend of Ben Butler as a campus prankster that as late as 1957, when Lloyd C. M. Hare wrote a long article on the General for the *Vineyard Gazette* of Vineyard Haven, Mass., he presented as authentic fact that Butler was the leader of a group of 'juvenile delinquents' who harassed the faculty.

They burned lamps late in the night, and toiled diligently to think of questions and answers with which to confound the tutors, and were eminently successful in producing chaos in the temples of petrified learning. For their pains they were dubbed blasphemous. The faculty had its small measure of revenge. Ben's scholastic standing was drastically reduced by a system of demerits dispensed for each saucy rebuttal. The lad's lean pocketbook was sadly nicked by repeated fines of ten cents each time he refused to attend prayers and sermons. When Ben graduated in 1838, the faculty was glad to see him go.

In 1900 the *Boston Globe* said:

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Ben Butler was a rowdy in college. Nothing was better suited to his nature than to be engaged in some brawl or up to some trick on a poor theologian. He bade blasphemous defiance to law, order, and the rules of the college. He tried to become president of one of the literary societies. The mere mention of his name in such a connection so shocked the ears of the members that he met with signal defeat. Over and over again he tried his best to get the office, and over and over again he was defeated.

Even a graduate of Colby who signed himself "Eighty Blank," who had heard Butler's English Union address in 1889, went so far as to think that Butler did not even graduate from the College. He wrote:

Some of Butler's biographers state that he was graduated in the Class of 1838, but when I was a student at Colby we were told, when distinguished alumni were mentioned, that Benjamin Butler had left college before graduation, and we always inferred that his leaving was not of his own volition, as many escapades while he was in college were a matter of tradition, and were well known to all of us.

What are the facts which confront this very substantial tradition? What do the official records of Colby College have to say about Benjamin F. Butler of the Class of 1838?

Whenever a student was disciplined, by reprimand or fine or suspension, the fact was recorded in the faculty minutes. Numerous are such records between 1834 and 1838. During those years Asa M. was censured for "violating the college laws by disorderly conduct in his room." William R. was "rusticated" to the care of a minister in Cherryfield. George A. was "put on special probation for idleness in attention to college duties." Walter J. was "expelled for neglect of study and immoral conduct." E. and C. were "put on special probation for repeated insulting disturbances in their room." Henry K. was required to "make confession before his class of the impropriety of his conduct in reading a certain composition on Monday the 24th instant, and must promise to give strict obedience to the college laws hereafter." Not a week went by without several students receiving fines of six and a quarter, twelve and a half, or twenty-five cents. During all this time, on all the pages of the record, the name of Benjamin F. Butler is never found as an object of discipline. In 1834-35 there are just two references to this student. On February 18, 1835,

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it was voted that "Freshman Butler be excused from absence till the eleventh of the month." When the college year ended, the faculty on August 1 listed among those to be advanced to sophomore standing Benjamin F. Butler.

In 1837 Ben was assigned and satisfactorily performed a part in the annual exhibition. When the spring term started in March of his senior year, the faculty granted him an extension of two weeks to the already long winter vacation, in order that he might complete his engagement to teach a rural school. At the Commencement in 1838, he delivered his part in the graduation program at the Baptist church and received his diploma.

One who reads of Butler's many alleged escapades may suspect that he was just too clever to get caught, that the faculty records mention no disciplinary action against the fellow because he always kept one jump ahead of the authorities. But such a conclusion is unlikely. In those days, a tutor (we would now call him an instructor) lived in each of the two dormitories with the students. During Butler's four years in college the total number of students did not exceed 70, including those who commuted. Furthermore, those tutors were young men who had themselves been students in the same college not more than two or three years earlier. They knew from recent and intimate experiences the ways of college boys. Ben Butler might have deceived the older professors, but it could hardly have pulled the wool over the sharp eyes and ready ears of Tutor Randall and Tutor Lamson.

So much for the negative evidence. Like all such negations, it is of course only indicative and proves nothing. Fortunately more positive evidence corroborates the assumption made from a perusal of the faculty records. That evidence is found in the records of the Erosophian Adelphi, the college literary society to which Butler belonged. This society was organized in 1835, and the third name on its list of members was Benjamin F. Butler. In March, 1836, when he was only a sophomore, Ben was elected lector of the society, in which capacity it was his duty to read what were called the anonymous contributions. This fellow, whom tradition pictures as a constant prankster without a serious thought, urged the Erosophians to obtain a locked box for the preservation of their records, and he was

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himself commissioned to carry out the project. It is interesting to note, a hundred and twenty years later, that, while many records of the early days have been lost, those of the Erosophian Adelphi have been preserved intact from the first meeting to the last.

In May of his sophomore year, Butler participated in the society's debate, defending the negative on the question, Does the manner of an orator's delivery exert more influence than the composition of his discourse? The next month he was on the winning affirmative side of the question, Ought the bodies of any persons except criminals be given up by the law for dissection by medical students? This is especially interesting in light of his attack more than forty years later on the authorities at the Tewksbury Asylum for doing the very thing he defended in that 1836 debate.

It is clear that, before he reached his junior year in college, Ben Butler was already recognized by his fellow students as a serious and responsible leader. In June, 1836, he persuaded the Erosophians to open their library to any member of the college on payment of an annual fee of two dollars. Disgusted at the practice of members leaving during a meeting, Butler secured a vote of the Erosophians that the roll be called at the close as well as the opening of each meeting, and that members absent at either roll call be fined. That motion was made by the young man who was supposed to be the very sort who would be most adept at skipping out of meetings.

In November, 1836, Butler read before the society an essay on Politeness. In the following October he lectured before the society on the subject of Chemistry, on the same occasion presenting to the Erosophian library a book on Animal Magnetism.

On April 4, 1838, only five months after Elijah Lovejoy had met death at the hands of the Alton mob, the Erosophians debated the question, Was the course pursued by the Rev. Mr. Lovejoy at Alton right and expedient? Ben Butler took the affirmative and won by a very close margin, eleven to ten. So divided was the opinion about Lovejoy's action throughout New England at the time that even in his own college, one of the societies could muster almost a majority to disapprove his course.

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Ben Butler was devoted to the task of building up the Erosophian library. He persuaded the society to employ an agent to solicit donations in the Kennebec towns and as far away as Wiscasset. Lest the rival society, the Literary Fraternity, beat them in implementing the same idea, it was voted "to keep the above vote a profound secret."

On April 28, 1838, Butler was elected president of the Erosophian Adelphi. The big event of every year was the society's anniversary celebration, at which some prominent man was always the orator. When the time drew near for that occasion at the Commencement in 1838, for some reason Mr. Curtis, the orator, declined to deliver his address. Guptill, chairman of the society's anniversary committee, resigned in wrath. At the last moment Ben Butler took over, succeeded in pacifying Curtis, arranged for the event to be postponed from Tuesday to Wednesday evening of commencement week, and got Curtis down from Boston to deliver what the local press called "a brilliant oration."

When the lock on the door of the library was broken and certain depredations were committed, the chairman of the committee to "ferret out the perpetrators of this outrage" was Ben Butler. Soon afterward the society decided they needed better quarters for their library, and whom did they select to go before the faculty with their plea for use of a larger and better room? The student who represented them, ably and successfully, was the one whom tradition tells us was a constant violator of college rules and one whom the faculty was glad to see go. If that was the kind of reputation this pleader for a favor had in faculty circles, we can only say that faculties have changed a lot since 1838.

Anyhow, there is the official record. In Waterville College one of the best behaved and most respected students was the little fellow from Lowell, Massachusetts, who could scarcely tip the scales at a hundred pounds and who in later years became the most controversial of all the Civil War generals.

