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Writers on the Rostrum

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WHEN Professor Herbert C. Libby launched the Colby College Lecture Series in 1928, the heyday of the one-night stands of great lecturers was already in the past. Although an occasional European still tried to follow the example of Dickens and a few Americans sought to emulate Henry Ward Beecher, few first-rate figures in literature ventured upon the strenuous schedule of a lecture circuit. Even the traveling Chautauqua had lost its popularity. Yet something of the old lyceum spirit lingered on the campuses of American colleges, especially those that felt a responsibility for cultural activity in the community. One of the most constructive links between town and gown was felt to be the visiting lecturer.

A constant problem faced by the sponsoring colleges was how to present popular speakers and at the same time have lectures of sufficient merit to be a credit to an educational institution. To strike that happy medium it was necessary to avoid the dull and abstruse, however scholarly it might be, and on the other hand not be a party to such sensational exploitations as had been Redpath's platform presentation of the twenty-seventh wife of Brigham Young. Professor Libby made no scholarly claim for his lecture series. He deliberately intended that it should have popular appeal, but he was equally determined to avoid the flashy and the frivolous.

It naturally followed that some of the Colby lecturers had their brief hour upon the stage and then were heard no more. Who remembers the soldier of fortune, Captain Patrick O'Hay, or the counter-spy, Major Thomas Coulson, or the thundering denouncer of "merchants of death," H. E. Englebrecht?

In the Colby lectures statesmen, warriors and publicists praised the good and damned the bad, as they saw it, from the pulpit of the First Baptist Church or from the lectern in the Alumnae Building. But to picture those fourteen years of lectures as devoid of literary merit, unworthy of mention in the field to which the Colby Library Quarterly is devoted, would be completely false. Literary figures of considerable repute
spoke to Colby audiences in that period between two world wars. They ranged in geography from Maine to China, in academic locale from Harvard to the University of Paris. They covered fiction, poetry, drama and literary criticism. Sometimes they used props like Carl Sandburg’s guitar or Margaret Webster’s costumes. More often the props were permanent attachments like Robert Coffin’s bristling moustache or William Butler Yeats’s shaggy locks.

Yeats was the shining literary satellite of the whole series. The Quarterly has already published divergent recollections of his visit, but more important than the Irishman’s mannerisms and allegedly rude behavior is the message he delivered in the old Baptist church on that November evening in 1932.

Yeats placed the turning point in Irish literature at the death of Parnell, when a number of literary persons in Dublin, including Lady Gregory and Yeats himself, organized the Irish Theatre. Yeats attributed to Lady Gregory the first modern recognition of the Irish dialect as appropriate for serious drama. Quite rightly he predicted that the island people off the Irish coast, who so resented their portrayal in Synge’s plays, would one day rise to praise that dramatist. “A new group of writers is really disturbing Ireland,” said Yeats. Then, as if in afterthought, he added, “Keep your eyes on Frank O’Connor.”

In 1929 Count Ilya Tolstoy came to Colby. He was touring America in the hundredth birthyear of his illustrious father, but his topic was not literary. He spoke on “Results of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.” He paid tribute to the Russian peasantry. “The peasants are the salvation of Russia; it is they who preserve the beautiful traditions, the proverbs and folk songs. It is the peasants who will yet lift Russia out of the dull, dead hand of Bolshevism.” Asked what his father would think of Bolshevik control in Russia, the Count replied: “My father would deplore Bolshevik violence. He was a man of peace and non-resistance.”

When Thornton Wilder came to the series in 1931 his topic was “Literature and Life,” certainly broad enough to let him talk on almost anything that entered his mind. Wilder denounced the new realism. “The aim of literature has never been to paint life with all its tedium and monotony. Human beings are given eloquence when their natural expression would
be inarticulate and dull.” Wilder was quite ready to defend
Melville against the critics who charged that no sailor or whaler
ever talked like the characters in *Moby Dick*.

Although Norman Thomas never achieved fame in belles
lettres, he did make on the lecture platform some statements
that have a Churchillian ring. In 1933, when the depression
was at its depth, Thomas pointed out the American in­
consistency of having “breadlines wading knee deep in surplus
wheat.” On another occasion he said, “Perhaps it is the des­
tiny of American socialists to provide thunder for the major
parties to steal.”

While he never attained the heights of India’s greatest writ­
ers, Haridas Muzumbar was no mean figure on the literary
scene. In his Colby address on “Indian Contributions to
Civilization,” he appealed for wider knowledge and better un­
derstanding of his country in the western world. Despite ad­
mitted benefits from the British raj, he felt that even some of
the best of India’s British friends had never really tried to
appreciate the indigenous character of the great sub-continent.

Only one lecture is recalled as almost completely unintel­
ligible to the Waterville audience. The Abbe Dimnet made a
futile attempt to describe “Europe from a Paris Balcony,” with
the view limited to literary Europe. The Abbe’s English was
faulty, and folks just couldn’t grasp what he said about Proust
and other contemporaries.

Wilson MacDonald, called “Poet Laureate of Canada,” read
from his poems, whose locale ranged from the Canadian Arctic
to the tip of Florida. Explaining the background of each poem,
he read such profound verses as “Song of the Ski,” “Times
Square,” and “Melissa Brown.”

In 1935 Will Durant talked about “The Crisis in American
Civilization.” He showed more interest in economics and poli­
tics than he did in either literature or philosophy. His state­
ments were caustic: “Manufacturers and rich investors in the
United States are looking for war to profit themselves”—the
familiar merchants of death argument. “Ignorant people, un­
aware of the ruthlessness of the political machine, are led to
perpetuate a vicious system. The American citizen is easily
fooled.” “Birth control in upper circles is to be blamed for
our lowered general intelligence.”
During the years of the lecture series the drama was well represented by Blanche Yurka and Margaret Webster. Presenting a program called “Comedy through the Ages,” Miss Yurka gave delightful readings from *Lysistrata*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Candida*. Miss Webster thrilled her Waterville audience with “Women in the Theatre.” Then she returned several times with her brilliant company of players, to give her modern dress versions of *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and other Shakespearean plays.

When Carl Sandburg came in 1936, he had already published the first volume of his *Abraham Lincoln*. Here he talked not about Lincoln, but about the subject that so absorbed both Lincoln and Sandburg—the people. Unlike many other lecturers, notably the aloof Yeats, Sandburg strolled about Waterville for several hours, meeting and talking with all levels of “the people.” In his lecture he remarked on some of the things he had seen and heard. Of course he used his guitar, and he drew loud applause with his rendering of the “Boll Weevil Song.”

Maine literature was well represented in the series by Robert P. T. Coffin and Mary Ellen Chase. So pleased were Coffin’s listeners that the *Colby Echo* reported: “Called the Virgil of Maine, Coffin appeals to all people who love rural living. He fills his poems with Maine color, yet is one of the most mystic of modern poets. As audiences have grown out of his poems, so poems have grown out of his audiences.” It was indeed true that, on this evening, as in his published poems, Coffin emphasized his conviction that “poetry is the making of a design out of the commonplace elements of life.”

Mary Ellen Chase took for her lecture subject “The Larger Life in Books.” “Novels,” said Miss Chase, “grow from ideas, not from people, from convictions not places, from faiths not events.” As requisites for a successful novelist Miss Chase recommended pity and thorough knowledge of people, genius to distinguish human values, and broad learning.

In 1938, Colby’s distinguished graduate, Dr. Frederick Pottle, told the Colby audience about the now famous Boswell papers. Though scholarly, this lecture was anything but dull and pedantic. So thrilling did he make the story that it seemed as if it came from Sherlock Holmes’s Baker Street.
Six years after Yeats had sounded the clarion call of the Irish literary revolution he was followed on the Colby platform by his fellow countryman, Oliver St. John Gogarty. He too spoke on "The Irish Renaissance." "Irish poetry," said Gogarty, "has always had a transcendental, mystical quality. Normans and Danes conquered Ireland but they had no effect on her literature."

When Eleanor Roosevelt came to Waterville, it was only two weeks before the presidential election of 1940, and it was inevitable that she should excite political attention. She was yet to win renown for her newspaper column, but she was already much in the public eye as a knowledgeable, literate person. Preceding her lecture there was an occurrence that became publicly known only afterward. While a guest in the home of Colby's president, she received a long distance call, from Washington. She confided to President Franklin W. Johnson her reaction to that call. "This means trouble," she said. "Steve Early has struck a Negro." In her lecture the First Lady spoke cogently and convincingly on the issues close to her heart. "War and unemployment are today's youth's chief problems." "We must believe as passionately in democracy as the totalitarian peoples believe in dictatorship."

A student generation covers four short years. So most Colby students missed at least ten of those fourteen annual lecture courses. But for faculty and townspeople it was a rich experience. The Chautauqua had gone; the silver tongue of William Jennings Bryan was heard no more; the voice of Newell Dwight Hillis was silent. But somehow, thanks to the energy and persistence of Professor Herbert C. Libby, the tradition of Dickens and Beecher lived on.