

Thomas Dunhill recalls

The R.C.M. LITERARY AND DEBATING SOCIETY

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*“And straightway*

*They brought back to the light of day*

*A volume old and brown.”* - LONGFELLOW

When, some months ago, I was asked to contribute to these columns a few reminiscences of my student days at the college, I seemed unable, with sufficient readiness, to ‘summon up remembrance of things past’. But memory is a strange thing: some trivial incident, some small discovery may seem as it were, to suddenly touch a spring within one’s mental storehouse, and set flowing a stream of recollections which have lain dormant for years.

I chanced one day to be turning out some old papers in a dusty cupboard, when I came across a bulky manuscript book in which were entered the rules, minutes, and general affairs of a little Literary and Debating Society, which was established in the College early in the year 1896, and flourished exceedingly for the space of some twelve months.

For an unremembered reason it appears to have died a sudden death soon after its first birthday, for the final record in the book of a regular meeting is dated January 26, 1897, and I believe that there has since been no attempt to revive its glories, or to establish any similar institution within the walls of the College. Yet if there is the same wholesome and genuine enthusiasm amongst present Collegians for literature, and the literary aspects of our own art as undoubtedly existed amongst the coterie which met with such regularity in 1896, I see no reasons why the spark should not be re-kindled, and a similar society organised upon a firmer and more lasting basis.

It is chiefly in the hope that this may be so that I shall attempt to set forth a short chronicle of our meetings of twelve years ago. From the point of view of numbers, the list of members of our society was at no time a very imposing one, though I venture to think that it included the names of some of the choicest spirits that ever

entered the left-hand doorway of the College. It was the strong desire of many of us that members should not be drawn exclusively from those who climbed the male pupils' staircase, but the proposal to admit ladies was somewhat emphatically vetoed, I remember, by the powers that be! In these days of Union meetings and 'At Homes' I feel convinced that greater tolerance would be extended to such a proposition.

The roll of membership during the first session included the following names, which were undoubtedly extremely representative ones:- Cecil Wybergh (chairman), E. Howard Jones (secretary), G. Von Holst, R. Vaughan-Williams, Willy Scott, Herbert Fryer, Sherwin, Carter, J. N. Ireland, Welch, Falkner, Collis, Beeching, Ridgeway, Sam Grimson, W. Kingdon, Fritz Hart, Martin Shaw, Percy Harmon, and J. St. A. Johnson. During the second session, which occupied the Summer term of 1896, we added to our list the well-remembered names of W.Y Hurlstone, Nicholas Gatty, N. Ingleby, Leslie Peck, Elliott, Chuter, Ellingford, E.C. Mercer, Percy Bright, and Edward Behr.

After a preliminary meeting for the purpose of formulating rules and regulations, the business of the society was begun in real earnest. It was decided that meetings should be held on Saturday afternoons, and on January 18, 1896, a goodly gathering assembled in order to take part in a reading of, and discussion upon Carlyle's 'Essay on Dante.' The two following Saturdays were devoted to Chopin and Purcell respectively, an essay on the former being read by Ridgeway, and on the latter by Vaughan-Williams, a debate following in each instance. On February 8, we had a reading of 'The Tempest', with Howard Jones as Prospero, Cecil Wybergh as Caliban, and Willy Scott as Miranda. The following Saturday was devoted to miscellaneous readings, and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February we had a most fierce and animated discussion upon the motion, By Cecil Wybergh, 'That Arrangements (in Music) are Inartistic, and therefore Inadmissible'. The motion, it may be said, was lost by a very substantial majority. I suspect that the composers were too enamoured of piano-duet symphonies, and the pianists loved their Liszt so well that it had a very poor chance of obtaining much support! On the 29<sup>th</sup> of February, Von Holst read a paper upon 'Bach's Organ Fugues,' on the 7<sup>th</sup> March there was a reading of 'As You Like It.' And on March 14, a discussion upon Max Nordau's 'Degeneration' – a book which (now almost forgotten) had created, at that time, a very considerable stir in artistic circles.

This closed the proceedings for the Easter term. It might have been expected that during the Summer the enthusiasm of the members would suffer some abatement. Not a bit of it! We met with the greatest regularity and had a very busy session.

The proceedings of the new term were opened, most brilliantly, by an admirable paper by Vaughan-Williams on 'The Rise and Fall of the Romantic School'. This was followed by a reading of 'Julius Caesar' (occupying two meetings), another of 'Othello', and papers from the present writer upon 'Mannerism in Music', and 'The Influence of English Literature on English music', from Von Holst upon 'The Future of English Music', and from Howard Jones upon 'Shakespeare's Tragedies'

The first meeting of the Christmas term brought forth two interesting papers by Vaughan-Williams and Von Holst respectively, upon 'Bayreuth' and 'Open-Air Music'. A debate on the motion by Vaughan-Williams 'That the moderate Man is Contemptible' (which called forth many entertaining speeches on both sides) was held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, and other meetings included discussions on 'Pianoforte Music', 'The Socialism of William Morris', and 'The Philosophy of Schopenhauer'. There was also a reading of 'Cymbeline' and a debate upon the question 'Has Music reached its Zenith?'

The Easter term of 1897 began in rather a daring way. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of January we met to debate upon the motion of Von Holst 'That Academic Training should be Abolished'. Von Holst was, in those days, a red-hot revolutionist on almost every topic under the sun, - and that such a proposal should come from a scholar of the College, and be uttered within its walls, savoured almost of rebellion and anarchy! On referring to the minutes-book I am glad to place on record the fact that the motion was opposed by myself. I have no recollection of my participation in this meeting, but it is evident that my flow of eloquence much have been of a most telling and convincing description, for the proposal was negative and condemned, Von Holst himself finding, at the conclusion, not a single hand raised in support of his motion! Thus was the Royal College mercifully saved from the danger of an organised revolution from within! On January 19 Fritz Hart read a delightful paper upon 'Gilbert and his Comic Operas', and on January 26 we had a thoughtful and suggestive essay from Vaughan-Williams on 'Didactic Art'. This was the last meeting ever held. A full programme had been arranged for each week of the entire session, which was set forth in a syllabus issued at the beginning of the term, but for some reason, which I am unable to recall, the meetings came to this abrupt termination, and nothing further has been heard of the Literary Society to this day.

The foregoing is, of course, the barest record of the proceedings, but it will give the reader some idea of the catholicity of our tastes in those days. It is interesting to observe that three at least of our members have since attained distinction in literary spheres. Vaughan-Williams is, of course, well known as a lecturer, Collis is

one of Mr Fuller Maitland's assistants on *The Times* staff, and Nicholas Gatty is responsible for the musical columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

Membership was, I think, almost confined to those who held a broad view of art, and our Society did not seek to appeal to students who moved only in their own special grooves, and had no outside interests. Yet a mere glance at the list of names that I have given will serve to convince the reader that the many-sided interests of members proved no barrier to the attainment of high distinction in particular branches of music. Of the pianists two at least have obtained almost European celebrity, the composers have nearly all come prominently to the fore, and representatives of other subjects are known to be occupying important positions, and honourably upholding College traditions in many and various centres throughout the world. We met primarily to listen to earnest essays and to discuss topics of serious interest, but nevertheless there was a delightful spirit of camaraderie about the whole thing. I well remember that at the conclusion of each meeting it was the custom to march off in sections down the High Street and indulge in a huge feast of tea and buns at Wilkins', where the discussions were not infrequently fully as enjoyable as those which were conducted with greater formality in Room 46. As we rose from our seats at the conclusion of the meeting someone would almost invariably give the signal by singing, in a lusty voice:- [*five bars of music appear here in Dunhill's handwriting, marked Allegro giocoso and ff – taken from Brahms' Symphony No 4*] Shall we go to Wilkins? Shall we go to Wilkins? YES!

Due regard was paid to the characteristic phrasing of the melody, and vigorous *sforzando* of the final word was enforced by a mighty chorus from the whole assembly!

And so it happens that, to this hour, I never hear the third movement of Brahms' E minor Symphony without a smiling and tender recollection of our old Society, and many friendships of my early College days.

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