

Debating Societies Where Many Famous Britons Were Trained in the Art Of Public Speaking

[By Right, Hon. S. W. E. Russell in the Manchester Guardian.]

As far as I know the oldest Debating Society in the United Kingdom is the "Historical Society" of Dublin. Its foundations were laid in 1747, by Edmund Burke, who with five others, started what he called "The Historical Club," and wrote with his own hand the minutes, which are still preserved. Out of the "Historical Club" grew the "Historical Society," which was established in the Trinity College in 1779, and in the debate of that Society such orators as Grattan, Wolfe Tone, Thomas Emmet, Archbishop Magee, the first Lord Plunket, and his grandnephew the present Lord Rathmore, practised the eloquence which is the birthright of their race.

The "Speculative Society" of Edinburgh was founded in 1764. It consisted of thirty students, elected by ballot, and had a curious rule by which a new member was compelled to attend the weekly debate. A due discharge of this apprenticeship exempted the member from compulsory attendance, but left him free to attend or not as he pleased. To this Society Lord John Russell was elected in 1810, and the record of his activities in debate covers a remarkable range of subjects—the policy of Algeciras, the Justice of the Peace, the conduct of Queen Elizabeth to Queen Mary, the imprisonment of Gale Jones, the Education of the Poor, the proceedings of the Spanish Cortes, the Emancipation of South America, the Expedition to Copenhagen, the Expediency of Indian Missions, the Merits of the Poor Law, the Value of Magdalen Asylums, the Prospects of the Spanish War, and the Importance of Canada. A wide field indeed, and a good training-ground for a youthful politician who was destined, during his long life, to fill all the chief offices of the State, Sydney Smith, who acted as Private Tutor to a young Gloucestershire Squire, lived in Edinburgh from 1798 to 1802, and observed the immense amount of mental activity which the debates of the Speculative Society engendered. Looking back from the stagnant Oxford of his own undergraduate days, he wrote thus:

A genuine Oxford Tutor would shoulder to his young men disputing upon moral and political truth, forming and putting down theories, and indulging in all the boldness of youthful discussion. He would argue nothing from it, but imply to God and treason to kings.

But as the nineteenth century emerged from its infancy into its youth, the spirit of free inquiry began to pervade the most unlikely quarters, and presently invaded Oxford, where its persistent vigor has since made ample demands for its late arrival. The Debating Society was founded in 1823, but soon came to be known as "The Oxford Union." There the silvery eloquence of Samuel Wilberforce was first heard, justifying the deposition of Charles I. There Archibald Campbell defended Roman Catholic Emancipation against Roundell Palmer; and there Henry Edward Manning predicted the happiest result from the free importation of foreign wool. What the Oxford Union has been, as a school of oratory and statesmanship, all England knows; but just now we must turn for a moment to a more youthful, and in a sense preparatory, institution. A Debating Society, which has bred Cabinet Ministers enough to man a trirème, it was learnedly called "The Literati," and met regularly "Pop," because it met in a room over a shop where ginger-beer was sold, its tone was intensely Tory. Current politics were forbidden subjects, but political opinion disclosed itself through the thin disguise of historical or academic questions. The exhortation of St. Paul and Charles I., the characters of Oliver Cromwell and Milton, the "Contrat Social" of Rousseau, and the events of the French Revolution laid bare the speakers' political tendencies as effectively as the conduct of Queen Caroline, the foreign policy of Castlereagh or the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. This was the subject of debate. To this Society W. E. Gladstone was elected in 1827. In those days there was an Eton boy—James Milnes-Gaskell—who had an unnatural taste for reporting other boys' speeches, and writing elaborate minutes of what was done in "Pop." From his records we learn that, on the occasion of his maiden speech, "Mr. Gladstone rose and eloquently addressed the House in favor of Education," and that in another debate he said: "I am well aware that my prejudices and my predilections have long been enlisted on the side of Toryism." Long! It was then not eighteen. William

Cowper, afterwards famous as the author of "The Cowper-Temple Clause," wrote this in his diary for October 27, 1827:

The subject for debate was whether the deposition of Richard II. was justifiable or not. Gladstone spoke well. The Whigs were regularly floored; only four Whigs to eleven Tories, but they very nearly kept up with them in coughing and "Hear, hears."

On the 1st of December in the same year we read:

Thanks voted to Doyle and Gladstone (who was leaving the school). The latter spoke very well; will be a great loss to the Society.

But Lord's loss was Oxford's gain; for Gladstone, going up to Christ Church in October, 1828, soon found abundant scope for his debating energies. Without waiting for admission to the Union, he founded an Essay Club, which was called, from his initials, the W. E. G. Each Essay was followed by a debate and a division; and Gladstone gave his assent to the deteriorious doctrine that "Political Liberty is not to be considered as the end of government." Trained by the discipline of "Pop" and "W. E. G.," Gladstone now advanced with sure tread on to the more conspicuous arena of the "Union," of which he was successively Secretary and President. He made his maiden speech on February 1830. Brought up in the nature and admonition of Canning, he was true to his great master's teaching. He defended Roman Catholic Emancipation, and thought the Duke of Wellington's Government unworthy of confidence. He opposed the removal of Jewish disabilities, and pleaded for the gradual extinction, in preference to the immediate abolition, of slavery. But his great achievement was his speech against the Reform Bill of 1831. One of those who heard it said in after years: "When Gladstone sat down we all of us felt that an epoch in our lives had occurred. It was the first time we had heard of a man who spoke as he wrote, and it had a momentous effect on the speaker's career. Among his hearers was Lord Lincoln, eldest son of the Duke of Newcastle; and Lincoln wrote home to his father that 'a man had arisen in Israel.' The Duke had a predominating influence in the borough of Newark, and when the General Election of 1832 approached, he acted on his son's advice and invited Gladstone to contest the seat. So began the career which we all remember.

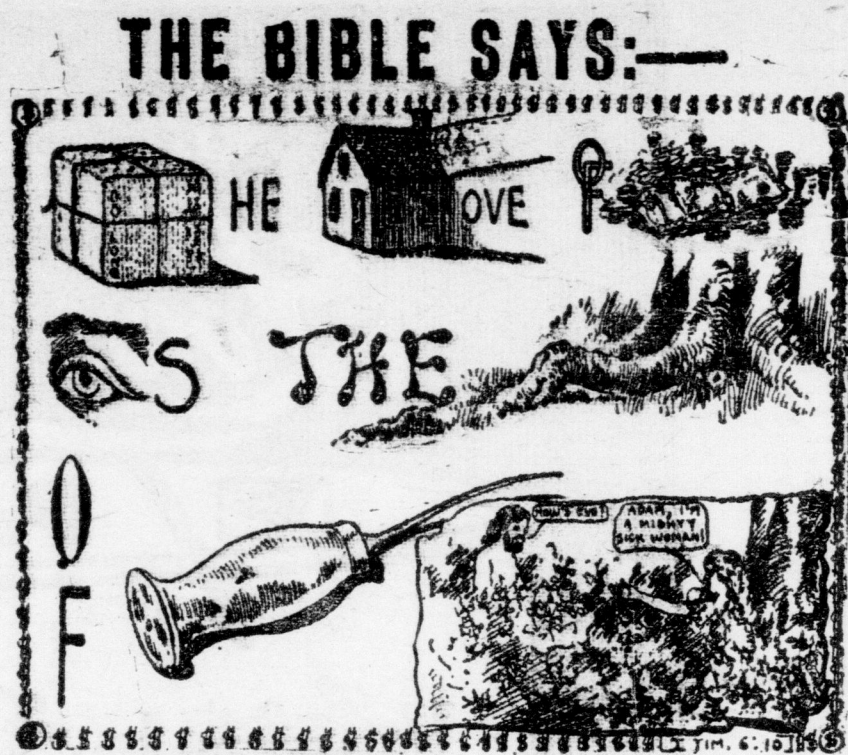
The Cambridge Union was founded in 1815, and according to Lord Houghton, had its habitation in a "low, ill-ventilated, ill-lit, cavernous, tavernous gallery at the back of the 'Red Lion.'" Sir George Trevelyan adds the graphic touch that a "Shakespearean burr, of more than ordinary variety, formed a prominent object over the head of the President." Of this society, Lord Houghton then Richard Monckton Milnes, became a member in 1827. Of his maiden speech he wrote to his mother, "My speech was a failure. I was dreadfully nervous, and not quite well, and there were near three hundred men present. I was applauded and cheered, but it was a failure. Another attempt may be more propitious." And so it was, for he was able to write home that he was pronounced the most Parliamentary speaker in the Union, though, a little later, he added, with reference to his political ambitions, "I am firmly convinced that all this Cambridge talking will be rather injurious than otherwise, if it is not skilfully and laboriously adapted to the House of Commons. Of all this Cambridge talking," perhaps the most memorable incident was a visit paid in December, 1829, by a deputa-tion from the Cambridge Union to Oxford. The object of the mission was to prove the superiority of Shelly to Byron. The Cambridge missionaries drove through the snow to Oxford, and found themselves most hospitably welcomed. "In a neat little square room," by "eighty or ninety young gentlemen sprucely dressed. . . . The Oxonian speaking is wretched." In after years, Cardinal Manning wrote thus of the debate:

I well remember the irruption of the three Cambridge orators. We Oxford men were precise, orderly, and unobtrusively earnest in our way of manner. The Cambridge oratory came in like a flood into a millpond. Both Milnes and Hallman took us aback by the boldness and freedom of their manner. We covered like birds and ran like sheep.

Besides these great Debating Societies of great universities, we might recall a good many minor associations of similar purpose. When Sir George Trevelyan was an undergraduate at Cambridge, he was a member of the "Literati Society" in the University; and this, he tells us, "took its rise at a time when the debates at the Union had given such an impulse to oratory that men were found on discussing to what extent Hampden was legally authorized in resisting the imposition of ship-money, and whether Addison or the Duke of Marlborough most deserved the Admiralty of Portofino." When the love of debating had seized Oxford and Cambridge, it was not likely that London would remain unaffected. Lord Beaconsfield has an intimate consisted of Cambridge men in the first volume of "Endymion":

There was a celebrated Debating Society which had grown out of the Union of Cambridge, and was originally intended to have been a Metropolitan branch of that famous association. But in process of time it was found that such a constitution was too limited to insure those members and that variety of mind desirable in such an institution. It was therefore opened to the whole world duly qualified. The predominant element, however, for a long time consisted of Cambridge men. This Society used to meet in a large room, fitted up as much like the House of Commons as possible, in Freemasons' Tavern, Great Queen Street.

Milnes, who attended a debate at



this Society in 1829, thus described it to his father: "The London Union does not seem half so good as ours. Sterling spoke splendidly, and Mill made an essay on Wordsworth's poetry for two and three-quarter hours, which delighted me, but all the rest was meagre in the extreme." Mill himself has said of a speech he heard at the Union from a young Chancery Barrister called Thirlwall: "Before he had uttered ten sentences I set him down

as the best speaker I had ever heard, and I have never since heard anyone whom I placed above him." The "young Chancery Barrister" became historian of Greece, Bishop of St. David's, and the only prelate who voted for Mr. Gladstone's Irish Church Bill. His speech on the Second Reading of that Bill is commended to the study of all those who wish to justify the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church in Wales.

Sir Edward Grey, the Man Who Dominates All Europe Britain's Foreign Secretary Known to Few, Understood By Fewer. Says "Tay Pay"—An M. P. Seldom Seen in House of Commons—An Ardent Advocate of Woman Suffrage.

[By T. P. O'Connor.]

Nothing could better bring out the extraordinary character of our Parliamentary and political life in England than the appearance and speech of Sir Edward Grey on his bill to give the franchise to women. The foreign secretary spoke after his habitual and unchangeable fashion. Whatever the topic, he always speaks in the same way. On the woman's bill, his tone, his language and delivery of his speech were exactly the same as they were on that memorable and historic day when he had to announce not merely to England but to the entire world the policy of himself and his colleagues in the British ministry on the gigantic issues of foreign policy; on all that terrible future which is to either preserve the peace or lead to a sanguinary and devastating war between the countries of Europe. He had even the same tricks and mannerisms of style, some of them manifest faults and yet so individual and characteristic as to be the effective means of his speaking. For instance, Sir Edward Grey has two very peculiar mannerisms, one of gesture, the other of speech. The gesture is to put his right hand behind his neck and to scratch his head. The mannerism is a curious reminiscence of one of the peculiarities of Gladstone, which was known to all the press gallery and many generations of the House of Commons. Gladstone also used to scratch his head, but it was always with the thumb, and not with all the fingers, as Sir Edward Grey does, and it was always on the top and not at the back of the head. The mannerism of speech which is to be found in Sir Edward Grey's speech is that he repeats frequently the same words when he comes to the end of a sentence. It makes the speech sound rather ragged and forced, but it is at the same time increases that impression of absolute sacrifice of everything to the simplest form of words; it increases that sense of detached, sincere commonsense, which is one of the secrets of remarkable effectiveness of this curious man's oratory.

The contradictions and contrasts of our Parliamentary life in England are brought out by this extraordinary similarity between speeches by the same man upon two such different subjects as our foreign policy and votes for women, but such is our political life; every minister has to be a maid of all work; he has to take his share in the daily life of the House of Commons however gigantic be the interests and overwhelming the work of his own department. And assuredly there was something very strange in watching this cold, self-reserved man speaking with his usual frigidity, detachment and bald simplicity on a domestic question like women's franchise, when everybody realizes that he has just come from the fiery furnace chamber, where around a green table the representatives of the great powers of Europe were discussing the question whether they were to apply the match to such a powder magazine as racial hatreds, Titanic armaments, and conflicting interests as Europe is today. And in this fiery furnace Sir Edward Grey has lived, not merely for the last few weeks, but for months, each day presenting its new problem, its fresh difficulty, its new threat. Perhaps the general public even yet has not realized all their foreign minister has to go through, perhaps even they do not realize all their country has had to risk and escape. For it is the terrible consequences of the present conditions of Europe, with triple alliances on the one side, and triple ententes on the other, that nothing can now happen in any part of Europe which will not involve the fate of every country. A village row on the Franco-German frontier, a disorderly scene among drunken or half-drunken men in a cafe, the accidental landing of an aeroplane in one country from another, finally Scutari which is at once the reductio ad absurdum and the terrible illumination of the situation, may threaten the whole peace of Europe. To set one country in motion with her army may involve, probably would involve, forcing every other nation in turn to join in the Devil's Dance of Death: Austria involves Germany, Russia involves France, and all four may involve England, and that terrible and destructive waste of human lives drawn from some of the most

civilized countries of Europe—all this depends upon given conditions of a drunken reveller, an awkward aviator or an obstinate and petty monarch, an incautious forerunner.

Why His Enthusiasm?

But Sir Edward Grey showed no trace whatever of the fiery furnace through which he had passed. He was cool, detached, self-possessed, speaking frigidly on a subject on which, as is known, his feelings are ardent and even vehement. People constantly speculate why it is that a man who appears so calm and so self-controlled should show such obstinate enthusiasm on a subject like woman's suffrage. The popular answer is that it is the final wreath he places on the tomb of the remarkable, brilliant and beautiful woman whom the slip of a horse on a frosty road tore from his arms, leaving him desolate. His is one of the modern tragedies in the private lives of public men. As to the common rooms, the dining-rooms, the smoking-rooms, the library, where so much of the pleasant social life of the House is carried on, the man does not live who has seen Sir Edward Grey in one of them. Often you will see Mr. Lloyd George taking his dinner or smoking his cigar in the House. Almost every day Col. Seely winds up his lunch with a cup of coffee and a cigarette in one of the smoking rooms. Mr. Harcourt nearly always dines at the ministerial table in one of the dining-rooms, and generally there are four or five of his colleagues around him, and Mr. Buxton, but the great figure is familiarly known in one of the smoking rooms, but Sir Edward Grey, never!

Be the explanation what it may, the interest of Sir Edward Grey in the question of the female vote has been even a surprise to those who think they know him. He has once or twice risked the whole existence of a ministry and a Parliament upon it, and he has separated himself for the first time from his dearest personal and political friends. After he has been in the House of Commons for more than thirty years, he has not been stirred even one inch from his purpose and convictions by all the brutalities and villainies for which militancy is responsible. It is characteristic of a man whose apparent calmness and reserve is associated with an inner volcano of passionate and immutable conviction.

The Dominating Figure.

It is, perhaps, this same blending of apparently opposite qualities which accounts for the extraordinary position he holds at this moment. He is at this hour the most dominating figure in Europe. There are other remarkable figures in the foreign offices of Europe; the men who made the Balkan war and carried it to a successful issue after years of secret preparation and of tremendous risks recurring impossibly, will be reckoned by the future historians as among the most potent figures humanity has ever produced, and especially Ferdinand of Bulgaria; Delizelos of Greece, and Danell of Bulgaria, but the great figure in Europe today is the British foreign minister. If peace has been preserved amid all the circumambient difficulties, if we have not known a position of such Dreadnoughts and their maxims, it is to Sir Edward Grey that Europe assigns the chief credit.

What sort of a figure is this who now occupies a position of such transcendent eminence and reputation? You might ask four out of five members of the House of Commons, even members of his own party, and they would have to own that they knew nothing or very little about him. He is one of the great members of Parliament, but there are few places where he is seen so seldom. The terrible work of his department is a sufficient reason for much of this absence. For except, perhaps, the colonial office, there is no department so hard-worked as the foreign office.

A Cautious Temperament.

But the absorption of the foreign office is not the only explanation of Sir Edward Grey's absence from the House of Commons. He has a curious temperament, in which many of the ordinary joys and attractions of life are almost entirely absent. He is a friend in the days of his Parliamentary youth that people were always telling him that the ball was at his foot and that he might get anything, and his answer always was that he didn't care to kick the ball. He has been forced into prominence and into his great position, not through himself, but almost in spite of himself, and perhaps the domestic tragedy in which so much of his joy in life went down, may have driven him to do as he has done so many other politicians, to devote himself to the work that tells as the one and only

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cheek has the freshness of a girl's. He still takes violent exercise when he can in the tennis court, his once favorite recreation; he walks to the House with an alert, springy step; he eats little, drinks less, and loves but with moderation a cigar. Such he is, a potent, a mysterious and uncertain figure, known by few, understood by fewer.

TAKIN NO CHANCES.

The ferryboat was well on her way when a violent storm arose, and fears were entertained for her safety. The ferryman and his mate (both Highlanders) held a consultation, and after a short debate the ferryman turned to his passengers and remarked anxiously: "We'll just tack your top-pences now, for we dinna ken what might come ower us."

PRETTY SAFE.

It was in St. Paul's Cathedral that a guide held forth thus to an American traveller: "That air, is the tomb of the greatest naval hero Europe or the whole world ever knew!" "Yes?" "It is, sir, the tomb of Lord Nelson. This marble sarcophagus weighs forty-two tons. Inside that is a steel receptacle weighing twelve tons, and

MINARD'S LINIMENT LUMBER-MAN'S FRIEND.

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