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G. O. Trevelyan: Morality and the 'Cambridge University Boat of 1860

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Terry L. Myers,
*G. O. Trevelyan: Morality and
the “Cambridge University
Boat of 1860”*



I have recently acquired a letter by the distinguished historian George Otto Trevelyan (1838–1928) that will amuse readers and underline some cherished suppositions about the Victorian Age. It will, moreover, apparently recover several lines suppressed in a modest comic poem of some contemporary interest and fame. I can not, unfortunately, discover to whom the letter was addressed, nor whether any subsequent printing, much less enlargement, of the poem came about. Indeed, I cannot even discover precisely where in the poem Trevelyan was suggesting his lines be placed.

The subject of the letter is Trevelyan’s poem “The Cambridge University Boat of 1860,” a piece of doggedly jovial doggeral “written, by request, before the event of the contest,” a witty celebration of Trevelyan’s friends from Trinity College rowing in the annual match between crews representing Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Dated at the end “March 24th, 1860,” the poem begins with “King Jove” deciding some twenty years before the race “To show to the world what a man should be like”:

‘Go fetch some clay; no, not that common stuff,
But the very best meerschaum—and fetch me enough.
I’ll make eight hearty fellows, all muscle and bone,
Their average weight shall be hard on twelve stone;
With shoulders so broad and with arms so well hung,
So lithe in the loins, and so sound in the lung;
And because I love Cambridge, my purpose is fixed, I
Will make them her crew in the year eighteen sixty.’

Though the last rhyme alone should have been enough to sink the poem, it goes for another 112 lines to celebrate the

crew, individually and collectively, not forgetting to acknowledge a certain Don at Trinity, Leslie Stephen, whose physical prowess and enthusiasm for rowing were legend: “To keep at their side on the gods you must call/For the wind of a Tutor of Trinity Hall.”¹ The poem concludes with lines where, I believe, Trevelyan was thinking his restoration might fit:

So at night, when the wine-cups all mantling are seen
(Whatever the mantling of wine-cups may mean),
With your temper at ease, and your muscles unstrung,
And your limbs 'neath the table right carelessly flung,
As you press to your lips the beloved nut-brown clay,
So cruelly widowed for many a day:
Oh, then as one man may the company rise,
With joy in their heart, and with fire in their eyes,
Pour out as much punch as would set her afloat,
And drink long and deep to our conquering boat!²

Trevelyan's letter is written from Italy, on printed hotel stationery with a crest (a griffin) and the address: Grand Hôtel (Brufani)/Perugia:

Oct. 26, 1909

Dear Sir

*I am glad to give leave to select what you wish for your volume. In the “Cambridge Boat for 1860” you can, if you choose, add a couplet, without mentioning that it is an addition. After, [“] (I think,) “Hermes his luck;
But Bacchus and Venus had best keep away,
At least for the month that precedes Putney day.”
Mr. Macmillan objected to it in 1860: [h] but half a century has now elapsed and it cannot have a serious effect upon public morality now.*

*Yours very truly
G O Trevelyan*

The objection by the publisher Alexander Macmillan (1818–1896) to Trevelyan's decorously indirect couplet (possi-

bly replaced by the even more decorous “so cruelly widowed for many a day”) provides one more view into the moral climate of the 1860s. Small wonder that in 1864 Dante Gabriel Rossetti cited “some funky reminiscences of the allusions to Venus” in Swinburne’s “St. Dorothy” as part of the reason Macmillan was not willing to entertain the possibility of publishing Swinburne’s poetry.³

The Trinity crew, by the way, won the match, March 31, 1860, rowing up the river, against the stream, from Putney to Mortlake, and against odds that slightly favored Oxford.

The College of William and Mary

NOTES

¹See Frederic William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (1906, rpt. Detroit: Gale, 1968).

²*Macmillan’s Magazine* 2 (May, 1860), 19–21.

³*Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959–62), 1, 108.

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