



TOMPKINS
COUNTY
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

NAVIGATING A SEA OF RESOURCES

Title: The early days of Cornell by Goldwin Smith D.C.L.

Author: Smith, Goldwin, 1823-1910

Call number: LH-REF 378.74771 Smith

Publisher: Ithaca, N.Y. : [s.n.], 1904 (Ithaca : Andrus & Church)

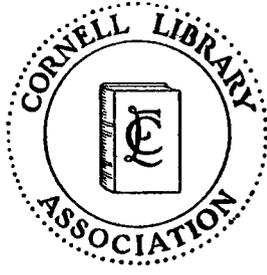
Owner: Ithaca - Tompkins County Public Library

Assigned Branch: Ithaca - Tompkins County Public Library (TCPL)

Collection: Local History (LH)

Material type: Book

Number of pages: 23 p. ; 22 cm



CORNELL LIBRARY

ITHACA, NEW YORK



SOURCE

LH 378
S
Smith

Early days of Cornell

A14305 626277



TOMPKINS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

LHREF 378.74771 Smith
Smith, Goldwin, 1823-1910
The early days of Cornell
[s.n.],
1904

Cornell Public Library

115 North Tioga Street
Ithaca, New York

THE EARLY DAYS OF CORNELL

BY

GOLDWIN SMITH, D.C.L.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF CORNELL UNIVERSITY
SOMETIME REGIUS PROFESSOR OF MODERN
HISTORY AT OXFORD

ITHACA, NEW YORK

1904

CORNELL PUBLIC LIBRARY
417 W. STATE STREET
ITHACA, NEW YORK

43167

ANDRUS & CHURCH,
PRINTERS,
ITHACA, N. Y

THE EARLY DAYS OF CORNELL

It was on a November morning in the year 1868, a morning chill, dark, and sad with rain, but bright in my life, that, having travelled by the night train from New York, I first set foot in Ithaca. I was received by Andrew D. White, and after breakfasting at the Clinton House, taken out on the hill by Ezra Cornell in his well-known buggy. There then stood on that hill one far from imposing block of building, Morrill Hall I believe it is now called. The Campus had not been laid out. No bridge was over the creek. All was Rome before Rome was built, and for the new-comer from that venerable city by the Isis had the full charm of novelty.

Now, after the lapse of a little more than a single generation, re-visiting Cornell, I see all these buildings, homes of learning and science in every branch, while the fair Campus is busy and cheerful with the life of three thousand students. Such is the magic of American energy and enterprise.

I had been in the United States in the time of the war, when I was Professor of Modern History at Oxford. Family reasons having afterwards led to the

resignation of my Professorship, I was left without any special occupation and was thinking of re-visiting the United States. Just then it was my good fortune to meet Andrew D. White, who invited me to take part as Lecturer on History in the foundation of the new University. The invitation was gladly accepted. The Lectureships were non-resident. But I willingly resided and took a regular part in the teaching for two years. Originally the Lecturers were ten in number; now I am afraid we are one.

Raw as everything then was, the eyes of the newcomer could not fail to feed on the supreme beauty of the site; the platform overhanging the lake; the azure lake, the gorges, the waterfalls, the woods, which, if I remember rightly, still retained some fringes of their scarlet and gold. Among all the sites for buildings which I have seen, there is not one which excels, I doubt if there is one which equals, the Campus at Cornell.

Ithaca has grown since that day and dubbed herself a city. But she has not greatly changed. One immense improvement, however, there has been. Blessed is the originator of the trolleys. I was then comparatively light and nimble, yet it was Alpine climbing up that hill. A corpulent Professor might have realized the

feelings of the fat Gibbon toiling up the hill at Lausanne to visit his lady love.

“O should she smile ! yet should she frown,
Still, O what rapture to sit down !”

To a lady who complained of being kept long waiting for the trolley an eminent Professor is said to have replied : “Madam, I waited for it for twenty years.” If he lived on the South Hill and had both hills to ascend and descend, his wail would be still more pathetic.

I boarded during the first weeks in the Clinton House, where I enjoyed the company of Agassiz, a great man of science, simple as a child. He told me that he never used a banker, but kept his money in his pocket, and when it was all spent, gave a course of lectures and made some more. He amused us in one of his lectures by an explanation of the deluge in Genesis which he thought would satisfy Ithacan orthodoxy. “When the Mississippi overflows, what do we hear? We hear that the whole country is under water.” He stood out to the end against Evolution, but this did not annul the value of his inquiry into Species.

Other notable members of the corps of lecturers were George William Curtis, Lowell, and Bayard Taylor. Curtis was an admirable speaker, an excellent writer on politics, a high-minded patriot, a true statesman

lost; lost because being a Republican he lived in a Democratic district, and by the local restriction which American constituencies have imposed upon themselves in their choice of representatives, but from which England and Canada are free, he was excluded from election to the Legislature. Lowell I had met when I was at Boston at the time of the Civil war; his patriot soul was then full of resentment against Great Britain which he, like Americans in general, wrongly identified with the Tory party and the *Times*. It was difficult for a Britisher to accost him without drawing a spark of patriot fire. But years afterwards I found him in London a favourite of London society, renowned as an after-dinner speaker, the competitor in that art of Lord Granville, the great master of it, at an Academy dinner, and entirely reconciled to the peculiarities of John Bull. To Bayard Taylor's lectures also I look back with great pleasure.

Ezra Cornell, our Founder, was a character more often produced, I take it, in the American democracy than in any other commonwealth. Raised by his own industry, intelligence, and vigor from the ranks of labor to wealth, he retained the simplicity of his early state and aspired, not to social or political rank, but to that of a great and beneficent citizen. His first question on find-

ing himself wealthy was how he could do most good with his money. He resolved on founding a University for the special benefit of poor students. His idea was that a young man might support himself by manual labour and pursue his studies at the same time. This proved an illusion. The experiment was tried, and I remember seeing a notice to those who desired employment in tending masons, but the result was failure. After all, we draw on the same fund of nervous energy for the labour of the hand and for that of the brain. Only in a man so vigorous as Ezra Cornell could the same fund supply both. A general invitation to young men of the artisan class in England which in the fullness of his benevolence Ezra Cornell put forth, had it been accepted, might have brought trouble on his hands.

I see the old gentleman now in his familiar buggy or sitting in the chair of state at Cascadilla on Founder's Day. His figure and face bespoke force and simplicity of character. His will undoubtedly was strong, and as he could not be familiar with Universities, it would have led him astray had there not been at his side the best of advisers in the person of Andrew White, whose self-sacrificing devotion to the enterprise for which he left his elegant home and his ample library at Syracuse,

with the salutary influence which he exercised over the Founder's policy, well entitle him to be regarded as our co-founder. In the early days I have no doubt he had much to endure in the way of anxiety and vexation as well as in that of discomfort.

Cornell rendered the most vital service to the University by locating the scrip given to the State of New York by the Federal Government in pine lands, while other States sold their scrip at the market price. That measure, while it entailed difficulties and struggles for a time, was in the end our financial salvation.

Ezra Cornell had been advised to place the University at Syracuse on the ground that the social attractions of a city would make it easier to obtain professors. But he refused, it was said, for the reason that he had once in his humbler estate waited all day long on the bridge at Syracuse to be hired, and at last had been hired by a man who cheated him of his wages. If this was a legend it was well invented. But it has been truly said that there is no pleasure more intense than that of being great where once you were little; and that pleasure must have been enjoyed by Ezra Cornell in a high degree when he saw his University rising above the lowly home of his early days.

Eminently plain, frugal, and abstemious in his own

habits, Ezra Cornell would fain have impressed the same character on the students of Cornell. If he saw a boy smoking he would go up to him and ask him if he had fifty per cent of brain power to spare. In this austere opinion he had on his side an eminent professor of mathematics at Oxford who told me that he marked a decline of brain power in his pupils, and that for it he blamed the weed. Perhaps for us Eton boys who had nothing like fifty per cent of brain power to spare, it was as well that we were forbidden to smoke. It is to be feared that Ezra would hardly have smiled on athletics in their present high development. The fashion had its origin in a social element to him quite alien, that of the wealthy youth of the English Universities; though I hardly think that in its native seat the fashion has prevailed in its extreme extent or assumed this quasi-professional character. An English boy, however, being congratulated on his score at cricket, magnanimously replied that he did not care about it for himself but had wished to give a lift to his father, his father being a politician of high rank. Wellington was supposed to have said that Waterloo had been won on the playing fields of Eton. In the playing fields of Eton when I was there, play was play and nothing more. Nevertheless those boys did win Waterloo.

Now Ezra Cornell sleeps in his grave of honour. His epitaph in the Memorial Chapel, like that of Wren in St. Paul's Cathedral, might be *Circumspice*.

A figure which my memory couples with Ezra Cornell is that of John McGraw, like Cornell a self-made millionaire, and like Cornell retaining in wealth the frugal simplicity of his early days. Like Cornell too he was generous, as the McGraw building bears witness. More of his wealth might have ultimately come to the University, as I believe, if American advocates and judges had been more familiar with English history. The English Statute of mortmain, which apparently was mechanically reproduced in the Statute-book of the State of New York, was not made to check benefactions to national institutions or to objects approved by the State, but to check the aggrandizement of the Church and the Papacy, which threatened not only to absorb property to an inordinate extent, but to impair the military organization of the feudal realm. But the chimes of Jennie McGraw are still vocal with the memory of the kind and gentle benefactress of Cornell.

Cascadilla held us all at first. The old pile claims our veneration as the cradle of University life. It is pleasant to see the gay vines creeping over it and softening its austere grandeur. In early times at night,

when every window in it was lighted, it was a truly brilliant object. Life in it was perhaps not very luxurious; but it was very social. The sight of it recalls to my memory many pleasant evenings and many a game of euchre. My thoughts often revert to my rooms in Cascadilla and to the platform from which I used to gaze on sunsets more gorgeous than those of my native land, and sometimes to watch the eagle hovering over the lake.

In those days I used to keep up my British habit of taking exercise by long walks. I would go to Dryden, spend the night there, and return on foot next day. Farmers with their teams seeing me plodding on foot and not understanding the British mania would kindly offer me a ride. Once I fell in with a farmer who was on foot and had a long walk and talk with him. He let fall something which seemed to imply that he took me for an American. Candour compelled me to confess that I was only a Britisher. "Yes," he said, "I knew you to be a Britisher by your brogue."

A summer vacation partly spent at Cascadilla was not dull. I had then a circle of Ithacan friends and acquaintances, now sadly reduced. Then there was a short sojourn at the little watering place of Spencer Springs, from which I attended a Camp Meeting and

heard "Rock of Ages" sung by many voices in a green temple of nature lighted by the stars.

Most Europeans visiting the United States form their judgment of the character of the people and of the political situation from what they see in the great cities. I had two years' intercourse with the people of what was then at all events a rural town, and was thereby inspired with confidence in the fundamental soundness of the Republic. I have often said that if a great question were laid before the people of Ithaca with proper information and sufficient time for reflection they would settle it aright. There is danger no doubt to popular judgment from the dilution of the native American element by immigration beyond the assimilating power of the public schools and other nationalizing forces. Otherwise it is not in the people, as it seems to me, but in the politicians that the danger lies.

There came out to me fourteen English workmen to be helped in their start here. None of them attempted to combine study with work. But I believe they did well; some of them very well. A memorial of their stay is the stone seat which I see still on the Campus, the work of their hands, with the inscription: "Above All Nations is Humanity."

Mr. Cornell said to me that he hoped the day would

come when there would be five thousand students in his University. I could not help hinting that there might be danger in such a multitude. Would there be a market for all the five thousand? If there were not, what would become of the balance? Nothing can be more miserable than a man whose sensibilities have been cultivated by education and who wants bread. This is a serious question for us when we are multiplying Universities. I am glad to hear that at present it gives birth to no anxiety at Cornell. There are more applications I am told, especially in the line of scientific manufactures, for Cornell graduates than there are Cornell graduates to fill them. Still I think the question is serious. So is that of forcing education generally, at least beyond the measure which is practically useful. If all could go into intellectual callings it would be well. But as society is at present ordered we have to guard against depleting the ordinary industries and over-stocking the more intellectual lines. "Some hands," as Carlyle said, "must still be soiled by ploughing."

The ideal and instruments of education with which I came into contact in passing from Eton and Oxford to Cornell were essentially new to me. The ideal of Eton and Oxford was culture, wholly apart from bread-winning, and the instruments of culture were the classics

and mathematics; mathematics holding at Oxford a very secondary, at Eton a less than secondary, place. The regular school instruction at Eton was entirely confined to classics. Even mathematics were an extra recently imported. The mathematical teacher was not recognized as one of the regular staff. He did not, like the masters, wear a gown, nor did the boys take off their hats to him. It was said that when he first came he asked the old Provost, a typical conservative, whether he was to wear a gown. "That is as you please," was the reply. "But are the boys to take off their hats to me?" "That is as they please." To bread-winning the system was supposed to lead only by general strengthening of the mind. In fact it was that of a class which had not its bread to win. Moreover it was a legacy from the time in which almost all the knowledge worth having, as well as all the literary culture, was still locked up in Greek and Latin. At Cornell, founded specially for students who had their bread to win, a different ideal and system naturally awaited me. Here practical science reigns, and a Cornell degree in that line is a passport to employment. The line, however, between practical science and culture is not hard and fast. The study of science in so far as it exercises and enlightens the mind is culture, though mechanical application is

not. The change at all events was inevitable. Even at Eton and Oxford there have been changes; the classics, though still predominant, have been making room for more modern and practical studies. From Cornell the humanities have not been banished as science and the bread-winning studies were banished from Oxford in former days. The government has done its best to encourage them. To them is to be devoted the Hall of Humanities in which the Muses are to reign, and the corner-stone of which I had the great honour of laying the other day. After all, the object is to train not only the bread-winner but the man. The bread is necessary to the bread-winner not only as his food but to enable him to maintain a home and to enjoy that domestic affection which is culture in the highest degree, if not of the intellect, of the soul. Yet wealth when it is made can be but half enjoyed without any source of intellectual pleasure. "What can I do," sighed the man, who, having made a fortune by building saw-mills, went on building them in the evening of his days; "I have no other tastes or interests; what can I do but build saw-mills?" The wealthier students especially are bound to be true to culture both for their own sakes and because they give a tone to society. In this Commonwealth, where there are no titles and politics are not to

the taste of all, the heir of wealth should try to equip himself for the part of a noble citizen.

In this highly practical age and continent there are those who would not only banish classical culture from the Universities, but apparently would put an end to College training altogether, holding that it not only does not fit, but actually unfits for the one great object of life. It has been said that an office boy at fourteen is worth more than a College man of four and twenty. All honour and success to the office boy. Productive industry must be the general foundation, though not the whole edifice of civilization. We live by bread, though not by bread alone. Survey the history of mankind; consider through what effort, what struggles, what sufferings humanity has been striving to reach the goal of perfection. If all was destined to end in the office boy, Providence, with due reverence be it said, might have taken a more direct and more merciful road to its mark. The admirers of the office boy, perhaps, have not fully considered how much productive industry owes to the most abstract science and even, though less directly, to cultivation and taste.

At Oxford I was always for the abolition of compulsory Greek on the simple ground that in the case of the vast majority of students it could not be thoroughly

taught. Very small was the number of those who after cramming it for their degree ever again opened a Greek book. We must bear in mind, however, that our scientific, philosophic, and medical language is Greek, and that if the knowledge of Greek were lost the words would become mere counters, alien to the rest of the language, without historical or living significance.

The world appears to be falling under the dominion of accumulated wealth. Money sways the legislature; money sways the press. This would not be good, even if the wealth were always in the best of hands. No one can look forward with satisfaction to such an end of all this political and social effort as Plutocracy. But how is that result to be averted? It begins to be whispered, By force; a terrible remedy and one which would be apt to shatter not only Plutocracy, but the social system. The office boy evidently will offer no resistance. A place in the Plutocracy is the aim of his ambition. The College boy, having a different ideal, may offer resistance, though of a happier and more salutary kind than force, and indeed is offering it now.

Among the accumulators of great fortunes themselves, some of the most large-minded and benevolent have paid homage to high education by the foundation and endowment of Universities. We have an illustrious instance of this in our own Founder.

Another important point of difference which struck me at once was the absence of competitive examination, prizes, and honour lists, which at Oxford and Cambridge are the great stimulants to industry. The stimulant is needed when the study, however valuable as mental training, is not in itself profitable, as are not Latin and Greek or the study of mathematics of which the student is never to make any practical application. In the case of bread-winning studies there is obviously no need of such a stimulant. Competition may be useful in awakening dormant powers. Lord Althorpe said that it was competition for a college prize which first awakened his intellect and led to his becoming, instead of a mere game-preserved and fox-hunter, a successful leader of the House of Commons. Cases of this kind there may be. But ambition is not generally the parent of happiness; nor am I sure that the effect of prizes is always wholesome. The intrinsic value of the study and the hope of acquiring through it an honest livelihood are the sounder and healthier motive. I should be sorry to see the competitive system, if it were possible, introduced here.

New to me again were the Fraternities, into one of which, the Psi Upsilon, I had the honour to be admitted in company with Andrew White, of whose friendship I

am proud, and Willard Fiske, whose death I deplore. I have heard misgivings about the system of Fraternities expressed in a quarter deserving of respect. There are no doubt varieties of character among them, and there may be evils against which it is necessary to guard. There may be danger of cliquishness. But in a University of three thousand students there must be inner circles, and there seems no reason for believing that Fraternities are likely to be more cliquish than inner social circles otherwise formed would be. Oxford and Cambridge are federations of colleges, by each of which to some extent inner social circles are formed. What the colleges do for Oxford and Cambridge, Fraternities do in a different way here. Friendships and interchange of ideas are secondary objects of college life, compared with study; yet they are important objects, as any one looking back upon his college life will feel. A Fraternity is surely better for this purpose than a dormitory. Nor does the connection wholly end there. You have still the Fraternity record, linking the lives in some measure together and serving perhaps in a slight degree to help in keeping the path of honour. In this wide continent, with its vast and shifting population, where a life begun in New York is continued in Chicago and ends in California, we should be grains in

a vast sand-heap blown about by the winds if we had not bonds of some kind to connect us with each other.

Of course I do not mean to defend anything so plainly wrong as rowdy or dangerous forms of initiation. I would not defend these any more than I would defend hazing, of which we shall some day be sick. At Oxford we had hazing in a very mild form. But the victims there were not so often fellow-students as members of the Faculty, Dons as they were called. A common trick was to screw up the outer door, "the oak," as it was named, of a Don's room, and thus prevent his appearance at morning Chapel, a disappointment which, if he was good-natured, was calmly borne. But if those young gentlemen had practiced hazing much upon each other, we should have had serious quarrels. Hazing broke out once at my College. The victim was an unpopular student. The member of the Faculty who had to deal with the case having the culprits before him said: "Young gentlemen, if you want to play practical jokes on any body play them on me, and I hope I shall not catch you. Me you cannot insult. Insult your fellow-student you may. We are the guardians of the honour of everyone beneath this roof and we mean to fulfill that trust." We did not in that College hear of any more hazing.

43167

Yet another thing new to me then, though now familiar, was co-education, introduced by Mr. Sage, the munificent founder of Sage College. One past middle-age does not readily take in new ideas. I am afraid I have not very heartily embraced co-education. I used to look with conservative sympathy on Wells College. I am not sure that I should not do so now. Equality of the sexes by all means, in suitable culture as in other respects. But perfect equality is compatible with diversity of gifts and distinction of parts in life. Are the co-educationists sure that they are not diverting woman's ideal, or that in diverting woman's ideal they would do right, making her the rival instead of the help-mate and companion of man? In the domestic firmament clouds appear to be rising. Nature, we all admit, has shown good judgment and taste in making two sexes. At all events she has done it, and when you oppose her she generally has her way. It does not seem that Vassar, Elmira, or Wells loses favour. A large proportion no doubt of our female students are preparing for teacher-ships in schools. Theirs is a special case; though the policy of consigning the education of both sexes in our schools entirely to women, begins itself to be the subject of discussion. However, there can be no doubt that,

granting the principle, Sage College is a great success and a noble monument of the beneficence of its founder.

There is, I think, a perceptible difference in character between the English and American student, the result of the different social moulds in which the characters have been cast. The English student looks to being ruled by academical law and is ruled with ease, provided you do not touch his pride, question his veracity, or irritate him by that which of all things he most abhors, the employment of espionage. The American student is more a law to himself and might be less patient of the restrictions of an English College. The trial of the Rhodes students will be a test. I cannot say that I should myself have welcomed that foundation. I see no use, while I see possible evil, in the transfer of a set of promising youths in the formative period of life to a social element different from that in which their after years are to be passed. An American youth may now get just as good an education even of the classical kind in his own country as he can in England. The underlying motive of the foundation is political, and with politics, universities, like churches, have nothing to do; they are the missionaries of science and culture. Athletic success and social popularity are not academical qualifications, nor is social popularity a

perfectly sound qualification in itself. Candour bids me add that I should have recoiled from making my University a monument to the memory of Cecil Rhodes.

Two years the English Professor spent in teaching at Cornell, and in his long life there have not been two better or happier years than those. He is often reminded of them by the greeting of an old Cornell pupil. It was not by any failure of interest in his work at Cornell that he was afterwards called to Canada, and to the homes of branches of his family settled before him there.