The Decemviri

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The gaps in our knowledge of Russell's first three years as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge, have often been commented on. Few of Russell's letters from this period (1890–93) have survived, nor have his lecture notes, assignments and exam papers (with the exception of a revision notebook he kept in May Term of 1893). Even his autobiographical comments are general rather than specific, and relate usually to the appalling quality of mathematical education at Cambridge at the end of the nineteenth century. It is only when he starts to study for the Moral Sciences Tripos in the summer of 1893 that we find anything approaching a full record of Russell's undergraduate career.

Some further light has been shed on Russell's first three years at Cambridge by Albert C. Lewis's discovery in the Trinity College Library of the minute books of various Cambridge clubs of which Russell was a member. Russell's involvement in two Cambridge clubs, the Apostles and the Moral Sciences Club, is already quite well documented. His contributions to the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club were the subject of a paper by Jack Pitt based largely on the Club's Minute Books held in the Cambridge University Library.

The Cambridge Conversazione Society, better known as the Cambridge Apostles, was the most famous university club of which Russell was a member. The Apostles' membership was known from his letters, but it turns out from the Society's Minute Books that, though he was a member throughout his undergraduate career, he was not a frequent participant in debates and on a number of occasions he was fined the two shillings levied against members who failed to speak for the required two minutes each term.

The Magpie and Stump was a large and fairly formal debating club and may, for that reason, have been less attractive to Russell than a smaller and much less formal club, The Decemviri, in which Russell was a member. It does not have minutes available for public inspection, but some of the papers Russell read to it have survived and were published (with accompanying documentation) in Volume 1 of his Collected Papers (t: 76–116).

The Russell Archives' new acquisitions do not include further documentation of Russell's membership in these two clubs, but they do provide information about several other clubs of which Russell was a member. The new material reveals that he led a rather full and well-rounded life as an undergraduate. He was, as we already knew, a member of The Sunday Essay Society and the Shakespeare Society, and the minutes from these clubs reveal a little more information about his activities. He was also, rather unexpectedly, a cox for the First Trinity Boat Club and a member of the Trinity Lawn Tennis Club.

It is less surprising, perhaps, that Russell should have been involved in two Cambridge debating societies. The best known of these was the Magpie and Stomp. Russell's membership was known from his letters, but it turns out from the Society's Minute Books that, though he was a member throughout his undergraduate career, he was not a frequent participant in debates and on a number of occasions he was fined the two shillings levied against members who failed to speak for the required two minutes each term.

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1 Research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
3 Photocopies in RA (REC. ACQ. 1,149).
6 There is a brief account of the Society by C. L. Ferguson, its President in 1919: A History of the Magpie and Stump Debating Society, 1866–1926 (Cambridge: Heffer, 1931).
7 In 1890, when Russell joined, it had just under seventy members, all drawn from Trinity College, rising to just under 200 two years later. The reason for the large increase in membership in 1892 was a contested presidential election, described by Ferguson, Chap. 11. Russell apparently took part in the campaign to the extent of chalk ing up election slogans on walls around the town (Ferguson, p. 30). Russell's other contributions to the Society are described by Clark, p. 41.
many of his best friends were active. Prior to the Russell Archives' acquisition of copies of the Decemviri's Minute Books, the only reference to the club that I knew of was in one of Russell's letters to his grandmother in which he announced he had joined the Trinity Lawn Tennis Club to which, he added, "all the Decemviri almost belong".8 From this casual reference I was unable to track down any further information about the group and left Russell's reference unexplained in editing his letters.

It is rather galling, therefore, to discover, so soon after publication, that the group is rather well documented, though not, apparently, in print,9 and, moreover, that Russell was an extremely active member, becoming Vice-President of the society in 1892.

The history of the group is not known, nor are its rules and constitution. The Decemviri were named, for reasons best known to its members, after the Roman legal term for an official commission of ten men. In 451 BC the decemviri legibus scribundis prepared a legal code and ruled in place of the regular magistracy until 449 BC when they were dismissed because they had become tyrannical. The Cambridge Decemviri were not, despite their name, limited to ten members, though there were never many more. Most members were drawn from Trinity, though there were a few from King's as well. They met weekly in the rooms of a member, to debate mainly political, university, or occasionally frivolous topics. Despite the level of informality, it was a debating society rather than a discussion group: motions were moved and votes taken.

Whatever the topic, the meetings seem to have been fairly light-hearted—occasionally even light-headed. For example, on 10 November 1892 three members, for reasons which were not recorded, wore masks and were the cause of much amusement; and on 26 January 1893 it was reported that coal was thrown out of the window for which, again, no explanation was given. There was also the meeting on 2 March 1893 when Mr. Wallington was the only member present and, having consumed the buns and coffee provided at meetings, "proposed to himself a motion in the direction of King's" and departed.

The regular membership included many of Russell's closest friends: Theodore and Crompton Llewelyn Davies, Eddie Marsh, M. Sheldon Amos, C. P. Sanger, George M., Charles P., and Robert C. Trevelyan, and Ralph Wedgwood, as well as a number of other students whom Russell knew from other contexts: for example, Robert Carr Bosanquet (see Papers 1: 92), John Waldegrave (Papers 1: 58), and W. H. Buckler (Papers 1: 58). All members seem to have been very active in debates—usually almost everyone present spoke, sometimes more than once (and occasionally on more than one side). Several of Russell's friends held offices in the society: C. P. Trevelyan was the President in 1892, Eddie Marsh the Vice-President in 1893 and the President in 1894; the Secretary was Ralph Wedgwood in 1893 and G. M. Trevelyan in 1894. The Decemviri seem to have been a relatively tight-knit little group. But, for all that, membership evidently had little of the effect on the member's life that membership of the Apostles did.

Russell was proposed for membership by John Waldegrave (seconded by Crompton Llewelyn Davies) at the meeting of 12 February 1891 and elected at the next meeting on 19 February. Only one further meeting that academic year (on 4 March) is recorded in the minutes, and there is no indication that Russell was present on that occasion, though the motion for debate, "That total abstinence is desirable", was close to his heart. When the new academic year began Russell spoke at the second meeting of the new term on 29 October when he seconded a motion for the abolition of the "Little Go" examination.10 He spoke again on 12 November and at the following meeting on the 19th. Thereafter he continued to speak regularly. For Lent Term 1892 he was elected Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the society. As Secretary he took minutes of the debates. (The minutes he wrote are printed below as an appendix.) In October Term 1892 he became Vice-President and thereafter regularly chaired the debates until he


9 Despite a search of several works on Cambridge and memoirs and biographies of people at Cambridge, the only published reference we have been able to find to the Decemviri is in The Man Who Knew Infinity: a Life of the Genius Ramanujan by R. Kanigel (New York: Scribners, 1991), who reports (p. 137) that G. H. Hardy was a member.

10 The "Little Go" was the colloquial name of the Previous Examination which was taken, prior to admission, by those intending to go to Cambridge.
became an Honorary Member in October 1853, as did all members in their fourth year at the university. He continued to attend and speak as regularly as an Honorary Member as before, at least until Lent Term 1894 when he makes no appearance though he continued to be listed as an Honorary Member.

The following table lists all of Russell's recorded appearances at the meetings of the society. The first column gives the date of the meeting; the second the motion(s) put forward for debate; the third gives the location of the meeting (i.e., the name of the member in whose rooms it took place); the fourth specifies Russell's contribution (i.e., whether he chaired the session, proposed or opposed the motion, or seconded the proposer or opposer, spoke for or against the motion, or was merely present).

**TABLE I. RUSSELL'S APPEARANCES AT MEETINGS OF THE DECEMVIRI**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>MOTION</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>RUSSELL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29 Oct. 1891</td>
<td>This house recommends ... the Abolition of the Little Go. 11</td>
<td>Tarn</td>
<td>seconded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Nov. 1891</td>
<td>That the Poets of the Victorian Age are the best.</td>
<td>Balfour</td>
<td>opposed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Nov. 1891</td>
<td>That we as a nation owe more to Rome than to Greece.</td>
<td>R. C. Trevelyan</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Nov. 1891</td>
<td>That in the matter of the oysters, the Walrus was more to blame than the Carpenter. 13</td>
<td>Benson</td>
<td>moved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11 This was actually an amendment to the main motion: "That this House receives with regret the Senatorial Sentence on the Greek Syndicate."

12 People whose names appear in this chart as well as in the Appendix, "Minutes of the Meetings of the Decemvir", are annotated in the appendix. Only those people who are mentioned exclusively in this chart are annotated here. A frequently cited source, abbreviated "Venn", is J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, Part II: From 1752 to 1900 (Cambridge: U.P., 1953).

13 The matter is a "puzzler" as Alice concedes in *Through the Looking Glass*. The Walrus duped the oysters, though he felt sorry for them as he devoured them. He also ate more of them than did the Carpenter, though the latter ate as many as he could. Alice was unsure whether to judge them on the basis of their feelings, their intentions or the consequences of their actions. See Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1970), p. 237, for commentary on the moral issues involved.

14 "Mr. C. Ll. Davies and Mr. Russell appeared towards the close of the debate."
The Decemviri

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<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>RUSSELL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23 Nov. 1892</td>
<td>That Balbus is a despicable character.</td>
<td>Bosanquet</td>
<td>chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Jan. 1893</td>
<td>That of all monomanias the mathematical is worst.</td>
<td>Lubbock</td>
<td>chair, for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Feb. 1893</td>
<td>That the House would welcome the abolition of the monarchy.</td>
<td>Trevelyan</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Feb. 1893</td>
<td>That the novel is at the present day, the most satisfactory form of literary art.</td>
<td>Barran</td>
<td>chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Mar. 1893</td>
<td>That this House would view with approval the Dis-establishment and Disendowment of the Church of England.</td>
<td>Balfour</td>
<td>chair, for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Mar. 1893</td>
<td>That the university be abolished.</td>
<td>Ll. Davies</td>
<td>chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Oct. 1893</td>
<td>That the house of Lords ought to be abolished.</td>
<td>Barran</td>
<td>chair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX: MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF THE DECEMVIRI

The following are all the minutes written by Russell while he was Secretary of the Decemviri.

Nov. 26 [1891]

In Mr. Benson's Rooms
The President in the Chair.
Mr. B. Russell moved "That in the matter of the Oysters, the Walrus was more to blame than the Carpenter". Opposed by Mr. Benson.

20 William Hubert Warre Cornish (1872–1934), a man "of great charm and scholarship" (Venn), was the Assistant Secretary to the Scottish Education Department for thirty-five years. He was admitted to King's in 1892 and was awarded a B.A. in 1896.

21 Extempore debate.

22 "but on which side did not appear".

There spoke
For
Mr. O'Rorke
Mr. Wallington
Mr. C. P. Trevelyan
Mr. R. C. Norman

Against
Mr. T. Ll. Davies
Mr. Mayor
Mr. Macnaghten

There voted for the motion, 5; against, 5. The motion was carried by the casting vote of the President.

Mr. T. Ll. Davies moved the re-extension of the Franchise to illiterate votes in the person of Mr. Balfour, which was carried, after an animated discussion, by the casting vote of the President.

Mr. Macnaghten gave notice of a vote of censure on the President for allowing the subject of illiterate voters to come up again.

Dec. 3 [1891]

In Mr. Macnaghten's rooms.
The President in the Chair.
Mr. Macnaghten moved a vote of censure on the President including the rescinding of the enfranchisement of the Illiterate Voter. During the discussion of this motion Mr. Crompton Davies occupied the Chair. The motion was carried by 3 to 2.

Mr. Macnaghten then moved that the proper function of man is work. Opposed by Mr. O'Rorke.

There spoke
for the motion
Mr. C. Ll. Davies
Mr. Balfour
Mr. R. C. Trevelyan

against
Mr. Hurst
Mr. T. Ll. Davies

Mr. Macnaghten moved the adjournment of the Debate which was carried nem. con.
Jan. 21st [1892]

In Mr. Norman's Rooms. The President in the Chair.

Mr. Norman moved "that there is nothing fit to do."

Opposed by Mr. Benson.

There also spoke

For this motion

Mr. Russell

Mr. Balfour

Against

Mr. Tarn

Mr. T. L. L. Davies

Mr. Wallington

The motion was lost: for, 3; against, 5.

Jan. 28 [1892]

In Mr. Balfour's Rooms. The President in the Chair.

Mr. Balfour moved "that a literary tripos is desirable".

Opposed by Mr. Tarn.

There also spoke

For the motion

Mr. T. L. L. Davies (2)

Mr. O'Rorke

Against

Mr. Mayor

Mr. Tarn (2)

Mr. Carr Bosanquet

Mr. Yorke

Mr. Mayor (again)

Mr. Hurst

Mr. Tarn

Mr. O'Rorke

Mr. Benson

Mr. Amos

The motion lost by 4 votes to 7.

The following gentlemen were elected:

Mr. Peacock of Trinity

Mr. Ramsay of King's

Mr. A. R. Hoare of Trinity

The following gentlemen were elected:

Mr. M. S. Amos of Trinity

Mr. E. H. Marsh of Trinity

Mr. Tarn spoke a second time, in favour of the motion. The motion was lost: for, 2; against, 5.

wrote of Amos, "He was an attractive youth, tall, enthusiastic, and awkward. He used to say: "The world is an odd place: whenever I move about in it I bump into something" (Auto. p. 142). Amos was a judge and government judicial advisor in Egypt and Britain, and Professor of Law (University College, London). He was the author of several books, including The English Constitution.

35 Sir Edward Howard Marsh (1872-1953). Marsh began his career at Trinity in 1891 and graduated with a first in both parts of the Classical Tripos in 1893 and 1895, respectively. He won the Chancellor's medal in 1895. Marsh worked as Private Secretary to Churchill (1907-16, 1917-22 and 1924-29) and Asquith (1915-16), among others. He was an established author, editing several influential volumes of Georgian Poetry as well as writing a number of books himself.

36 Sir Percy Maurice McLardie Sheldon Amos (1872-1953). Amos was admitted to Cambridge (Trinity) in 1891, graduating with a b.a. (1st Class) in 1891, and became a barrister in 1897. Russell was introduced to Amos by Logan Pearsall Smith on a visit to Cambridge, since Amos' mother and Mrs. Pearsall Smith were friends. Russell
List of Members, First Term 1892.

President: Mr. C. P. Trevelyan
Vice-President: Mr. H. W. L. O'Rorke
Hon. Sec. and Treasurer: Mr. B. A. W. Russell
Mr. R. C. Bosanquet
Mr. T. L. Davies
Mr. R. Y. G. Mayor
Mr. A. E. Balfour
Mr. V. W. Yorke
Mr. C. Y. Hurst
Mr. F. M. Wallington
Mr. R. C. Norman
Mr. R. C. Trevelyan
Mr. R. H. Benson
Mr. M. S. Amos
Mr. E. H. Marsh
Mr. W. Peacock
Mr. A. R. Hoare
Mr. A. B. Ramsay

Feb. 11 [1892]

In Mr. Davies Rooms: Mr. T. L. Davies, Ex-President, in the chair.
Mr. Russell moved “that the Chaperon ought to be abolished”.
Opposed by Mr. Wallington.

Feb. 18 [1892]

In Mr. Carr Bosanquet rooms, the President in the Chair.
Mr. O’Rorke gave notice of a motion that this Society pledge itself to support Mr. Gordon in the coming election of President at the M[agpie] S[tump] Debating Society.

Mr. Bosanquet moved “that this age is the most romantic.”
Opposed by Mr. Marsh.

After Mr. Marsh’s speech Mr. Amos entered and inquired if the Hon. Proposer referred to his own age; the Hon. Proposer replied that the world was at the same age as himself, i.e. had just left school. There then spoke

For the motion
For the motion
Mr. Carr Bosanquet (2)                         Mr. Marsh
Mr. Tarn                                         Mr. Norman
Mr. Balfour (2)                                 Mr. Peacock
Mr. Amos                                       Mr. Benson

Against
Against
Mr. Yorke                        Mr. Amos (2)
Mr. Ramsay                        Mr. Benson
Mr. Peacock
Mr. Norman

The motion lost: 4; against, 7.

Feb. 25 [1892]

In Mr. R. C. Trevelyan’s rooms.
The President in the Chair.
Mr. Amos moved “that this house would approve of an 8 hours’ bill.
Opposed (more or less) by Mr. R. C. Trevelyan.
There also spoke
  For the motion   Against
Mr. T. Ll. Davies  Mr. R. C. Norman
                Mr. O'Rorke

The motion was carried by 4 votes to 3.

Mr. O'Rorke's private business notion that this Society pledge itself to support Mr. Gordon was ruled out of order as not being private business.

March 3 [1892]

In Mr. Tarn's rooms.
Mr. Carr-Bosanquet in the chair at first, afterwards Mr. O'Rorke.
Mr. Peacock moved "that this house is in favour of the principle of one man one vote"
Opposed by Mr. Tarn.

There also spoke
  For the motion   Against
Mr. R. C. Trevelyan  Mr. Benson
Mr. Russell        Mr. Tarn (again)
Mr. Amos          Mr. Carr Bosanquet (2)
Mr. Marsh

On a division there appeared for 6, against 6. The motion was lost by the casting vote of the chairman.