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A HISTORY OF THE CAUSERIES DU LUNDI

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Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve's writings were voluminous and enormously influential in the world of French literature. His documentation was almost always impeccable, due to his fanatical respect for historical accuracy. In one of the commonplace books in which he recorded his thoughts as they came to him, he wrote: "The Good, the True, and the Beautiful make a fine motto, but if I had a motto it would be Truth and Truth alone. And let the Good and the Beautiful look after themselves as best they may." His concept of criticism reflected in his essay, "Critical Genius," revealed a "critical activity that is inquisitive, untrammeled, independent, and a contributory element in the formation of public opinion and private taste, and to this liberal conception he adhered throughout his working life," quoted from the Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th Edition, 1979.

In attempting to create a background for our literary ladies, I have endeavored to present a brief look at life in New York City 20 years or so after the Civil War until the tum of the century.

What was New York City like at this time, and what were some of its characteristics and social customs, so vastly changed in a little over a century? The population of the city then was 1,911,698, and today it is roughly 7,072,000. Prior to the Eighties, the East Side was the location of the sites of beautiful, quiet, country homes with grounds sloping down to the East River? To continue, William Shakespeare may be quoted as follows: "I pray you let us satisfy our eyes, with the memorials and the things of fame that do renown this city." A famous landmark, the old Croton Reservoir, was the site of what is now the New York Public Library. The building of the reservoir marked the end of the Sunday parade crowd. The neighborhood of 42nd Street was expanding, population rose, brownstones, with their doleful architecture, appeared. Churches were being built, St. Bartholomew's moved up from Lafayette Place to 44th Street, and by 1871, Grand Central Depot had been built. The telephone was beginning to be introduced, and the company went to great pains to popularize its use.

Memories of the Civil War had long since faded, and the city of New York was burgeoning and expanding at a great rate. There was new wealth and money after the war. Huge fortunes were suddenly acquired.

Oil was discovered in Pennsylvania, producing lucrative fields, and industry underwent enormous expansion, along with a huge production of grain and cattle.

Along with the building of churches and brownstones, huge mansions were built on Fifth Avenue, some by the Vanderbilts, in the eighties and nineties, but later demolished in the twenties. Who can forget the elegant house at 57th and 58th Street facing the Plaza, and the great house inspired by a French chateau at 52nd Street?

There were numerous hotels, on Broadway below 23rd, such as the Astor House, the Everett House, favorite of opera singers and musicians, the Delmonico at the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 14th Street, which had the best food, and the Brevoort at 9th Street and Broadway, where aristocrats stayed.

Trade was booming, and some of the great department stores were in their heyday: A.T. Stewart's at 9th Street, Lord and Taylor, which had moved to 20th Street in the eighties from #47-49 Catherine Street, Arnold Constable at Broadway and 19th Street, John Wanamakers, successor to Stewart's, and B. Altman at Sixth Avenue. Cottons were imported from India known as "huru-hurus" and were quite sleazy, although some sort of starch was added to give them more body. The U.S., in fact, manufactured a few woven domestic cottons, but we imported silks from France and Italy, and crepes and satins from India and China.

Archery and croquet were played in Central Park, and lawn tennis suddenly appeared. Sport clothes were designed and baseball was just coming into vogue. Who could have guessed that it would become our national pastime?

Some interesting events took place in this period, notably the New York Yacht Club Races. In 1881, "Mischief' and "Atlantic" sailed two races for the America's Cup in a 32-mile course off New York City water, and in 1893 "Vigilante" and "Valkyrie" raced for the Cup with the former as winner. A nautical event, by contrast, occurred in 1872 when Philip Corel and others circumnavigated the island of Manhattan in a rowboat. They departed at 7:30 a.m. and concluded this voyage at 7:30 p.m. with some stops on the way!

Of course, no one will forget the Great Blizzard of 1888. For many years, everything dated from before or after the storm. There was no communication for days, and the railroads were all out. On October 10, 11, and 12, 1892, this city celebrated the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. It was a great celebration, with a school children's day and navy and military parades. Three years earlier, on April 29 and 30 -May 1, 1889, there was the Centennial Celebration of Washington's Inaugural. One item of news in 1875 reported the importation of the English sparrow for protection of trees in the city parks from insects' defoliation. Such was the interest in and novelty of a new species of bird that people hastened to build them birdhouses in Central Park.

Along with this growth of the city at this time, one of the most famous streets to be noted was Bond Street, which extended from Broadway to the Bowery. Here wealthy merchants made their homes. Among them were William P. Furniss, whose house, #11, was built in 1835. He later built a summer home on Riverside Drive with property extending from 97th Street to 100th Street. It was a large

Victorian colonnaded mansion and the house of my great-grandfather, Thomas Russell Clark, who bought it from Mr. Furniss. Here his family, my father, and his sister spent their early childhood, with nothing but fields between the house and the New York Central Railroad, built along the Hudson River below.

There were no museums as such in the city before 1870, but there were well-known private galleries and collections of art, particularly that of John Taylor Johnson, who owned a notable collection of American paintings. It was open to the public and was a most important collection, but there was no building in which to house it. Collections were bought and stored in Cooper Union. On January 31, 1870, the first officers of the future Metropolitan Museum of Art were chosen, with John Taylor Johnson as president. A house was finally found at the Dodworth Building at 681 Fifth Avenue, between 54th and 55th Streets. It was leased on December 1, 1871, for $9,000 a year, the lease to expire May 1, 1874. The property also included a stable, for horse-drawn carriages were still in use.

In this decade, Sarah Bernhardt came to New York along with Lily Langtry and Minnie Maddern Fiske, who visited in 1882. John La Farge was painting, and the Church of the Ascension was built.

Transportation was difficult, in spite of stagecoaches and streetcars. People went from downtown to Harlem by the fast Harlem boats. Street lighting was by gas, as were most houses. (As a child, I remember visiting my great-grandmother at her home in 1919, when the chambermaid went around at dusk, drawing the curtains and lighting the gas house lamps.)

Society in the early eighties was a curious mixture of genuine culture, some snobbishness, and considerable ostentatious display, with amusing rivalry produced by the antics of certain persons considered to be the leaders. The "400," Ward McAllister (from a good Savannah, Georgia, family), and the Great Washington Centennial Ball at the Metropolitan Opera House belong to this period, for New York in the eighties was elegant. There was a formality to social life, one example of which was the custom of calls and callers. Morning calls were made between 11:00 and 12:00, and afternoon calls between 2:00 and 4:30, with evening calls between 8:00 and 9:00.

One of the great city festivals started in the city by the Dutch in what was then Nieu Amsterdam was the New Year's Day custom of calling. A week or two before the first of the year, young men would receive cards from their various girlfriends giving them the address at which they would receive on New Year's. Some kept it strictly in the family. Others combined and received in one of the houses initially agreed upon. Young men were supposed to leave a card for each of the young ladies upon whom they called. There was a good deal of ingenuity in the composition of the cards. Some were richly decorated in powdered tissue to represent glistening snow; others were in gorgeously embossed floral designs. A modest one had sable fringe all around in reds, greens, and blues. This charming custom died out practically overnight, unfortunately, but for the rest of the year, ladies stayed at home to receive calls, and gentlemen had undisputed use of the thoroughfares from 9:00 a.m. until midnight.

In spite of the different strata and classes of society, there were families of real culture and unquestioned position. Entertaining was very formal by today's standards, and much more food was served and consumed. Menus were elaborate and lengthy, and I give as an example a dinner recorded

by my grandmother in her book of dinner parties dated June 3, 1895. Pink candle shades, pinks, freesia, and geranium leaves, green bonbons, chocolates, salted almonds, radishes, and olives. Vermicelli soup. Filet of sole -sauce tartare. Sweetbreads, brown sauce, fresh peas, roast beef, new potatoes with parsley, asparagus, tomatoes (served each on a leaf of lettuce), French dressing with onion biscuits and cheese. Nesselrode ice cream, coffee liqueurs, and fruit.

One charming custom which has persisted until this day was the keeping of autograph books by young ladies, usually of school age. All young girls owned one, and I quote two samples from an unknown book:

"You ask me to write something original

But I don't know where to begin

For there's nothing original in me

Except original sin."

"In the tempest of life

When you use an umbrella

May it be upheld

By a handsome young fellow."

After 1898, New York City became Greater New York, and the Island at the Hudson River's mouth became the Borough of Manhattan.

And now we come to the history of the Causeries du Lundi and some glimpses of our literary ladies. We must presume that they were all well-educated, but not college graduates as far as we know. They must have been familiar with the great French classics, both prose and poetry, and were well acquainted with the literature and authors of their day.

On Monday, April 12, 1880, about fifty ladies met at what was then probably the house of Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton Cullum, wife of General George Cullum, U.S.A., at 258 Fifth Avenue. She had invited them to lunch with her to consider founding a literary organization, which was to be called the Causeries du Lundi, suggested no doubt by the famous "Causeries" of Sainte-Beuve. Mrs. Cullum was the granddaughter of Alexander Hamilton, and from reading old records of the early days of the Causeries, it is evident that Mrs. Cullum was a most charismatic person --beautiful, possessing a great intellect, and a woman of strong character and fine leadership qualities. At this first meeting, she was chosen as President, Mrs. Sherwood to be Vice President, Mrs. Post as Treasurer, and Mrs. Pellew appointed Secretary. A constitution was drawn up for the election of officers, and plans were laid for future

Monday meetings. Mrs. Cullum, during her Presidency, made every effort "to induce society women to apply their minds outside of home and social duties." A quote from Sarah Howell's account of the Causeries du Lundi, written to be presented among the Clubs of New York at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, states, "The object of the club, when started, was not so much to collect a society of brilliant women as to develop latent talent where it might exist, in women looked upon as mere society women." The organization flourished thereafter, and in time became known as the "class." In 1885, after the death of Mrs. Cullum, many members wished to change the name to the Cullum Club, in memory of the founder and first president; but after due consideration, it was decided to keep the original name.

I have borrowed freely from Evelyn Hutchins' history, "In the Beginning," and she states that in the early days, papers were to be of fifteen minutes' duration, and that members were asked to bring artifacts pertaining to the subject of the day. Early subjects assigned to papers all related to Art in Antiquity. As the years went on, the duration of a paper's reading time increased to thirty minutes, and a much wider field of subjects was adopted. At the time of the organization of this society, there was no other like it in New York City. It was very new at the time to the social world under whose auspices it was founded. It is the oldest one of its kind in the city and reportedly the second oldest literary society among women in the country. In leafing through the first minute books, I find the names of some of those original members: Mesdames de Cesnola, Parsons, Thompson, Griffin, Peabody (Mrs. Cullum's sister), Dahlgren, Cooke, Johnston, Smith, Erving, Bell, Blodgett, Day, Howell, Jessup, Ives, Livermore, Drexel, deForest, Marquand, and Rutherfurd.

Also the Misses Hamilton, Van Rensselaer, Jones, Bliss, Tuckerman, and dePeyster. These ladies were hostesses for subsequent meetings following this foundation. For the most part, they all lived in what we would call downtown today, and no one lived above 57th Street in the early eighties. Mrs. Cullum appears to have moved several times during this period, since records of meetings at her house noted different addresses.

Not wishing to duplicate Mrs. Hutchins' fine paper written in 1984, I only wish to list once more the different anniversaries of the Causeries:

The Decennial Book -1890, written by Mrs. Johnston.

The 20th Anniversary Book -1900, written by Mrs. Howells and Mrs. Sherwood. It included a copy of the Constitution and Bylaws.

The 25th Anniversary -1905. There was no book, but the date was celebrated with a splendid banquet given by Mrs. Lawton at the Cafe Martin. Mrs. Erving reported this event, at which time each member was given a copy of Sainte-Beuve's Causeries du Lundi -1849-1852.

The Golden Jubilee -1930. The essay was written by Miss Alice Delano Weeks, who was also the hostess on this occasion, and the important position of archivist was created.

The Diamond Jubilee -1955. Miss Barbara Cheney wrote the story and an account of Miss Week's party for the Golden Jubilee. A copy of the account, bound in gold covers, was given to each member. The Diamond Jubilee was celebrated with a luncheon party held at the house of Miss Julian Grant.

Our 100th Anniversary was celebrated in 1980 with a luncheon held at the New York Junior League on April 21, 1980. Our guest speaker was Arnold Whitridge, noted Yale scholar and Professor of English. It was a splendid and festive occasion, and each member felt a strong sense of pride in our accomplishments over the years and looked forward with anticipation to papers by future members in the years to come (see minutes of 1980).

As noted previously, it is sad to relate that no copies of papers written earlier than 1904 exist, nor is there any record of minutes from 1886 to 1905.

In closing, I would like to mention that an item concerning our silver bell has come to my attention. Mrs. Charles F. Swan presented a handsome silver bell (Howard and Co.) to our organization. It belonged to Miss Hamilton, sister of Mrs. Cullum, our first President. As each President rings it to mark the start of our meetings, may its delicate tones usher us into a world of fact, fantasy, and imagination.

Bibliography: New Encyclopedia Brittanica, 15th Edition Valentine's Manuals, 1916-1928 Henry Collins Brown, Vols. 1926, 1927, 1928 In the Beginning. Quotes and Comment, Evelyn B. Hutchins, 1984