
MASK OF TREACHERY

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has led to the popular belief that the society was the only forum for Soviet recruiting at Cambridge. This myth has been encouraged by the traditional apostolic fetish for secrecy. Understandably this has brought embarrassment for a super-elitist fraternity that traditionally restricted new elections to an average of one or two of the best and brightest of each undergraduate year. Among the society's select membership of over a century and a half are many eminent intellectuals. The best known of the Apostles of the nineteenth century are Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson, physicist James Clerk Maxwell, historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, and philosopher Bertrand Russell. Twentieth-century luminaries include economist John Maynard Keynes, writer E. M. Forster, poet Rupert Brooke, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Nobel Laureate Sir Alan Hodgkin, and the contemporary author, theater director, TV personality, and polymath Jonathan Miller.

Blunt openly declared in 1973 that he was a member of the Apostles, insisting that it was "no longer indecent" to refer to the society in public. But most of his surviving contemporaries are still too outraged at his betrayal to discuss him. George Rylands (elected in 1922) has repeatedly declined invitations to comment, although he could have shed some light on Blunt's election over academically better qualified embryos. Richard Bevan Braithwaite, the outstanding mathematician and moral scientist of his generation at Cambridge (elected in 1921), did agree to discuss his contemporaries. But the then eighty-four-year-old professor abruptly terminated the interview when asked about the Apostles, whose affairs, he reminded me, were strictly confidential.²¹

Fortunately for history, some of the more junior members of the society have adopted a more liberal interpretation of the fearsome oath of apostolic confidentiality. According to a recent paper on the history of the society, secrecy was considered necessary by the Victorian Apostles who played a leading role in opposing the doctrinaire authority of the Church of England. Members adopted a quasi-religious ritual, referring to themselves as "brethren" and outsiders as "phenomena." Graduate Apostles who had "taken wings" and become "angels" were released from the obligation to attend every meeting. Ritual secrecy continued even when the aggressive logical humanism of the 1890s replaced liberal Christianity.²²

The philosophers James MacTaggart, George Edward Moore, and Bertrand Russell ensured that the Apostles became the intellectual nursery for the Bloomsbury generation. "It was to be a principle in discussion that there were to be no taboos, no limitations, nothing considered shocking, no barriers to absolute freedom of speculation,"

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Russell recorded in his autobiography. At the Saturday evening meetings the chosen member took to the "hearthrug" to deliver a discourse while the assembled brethren feasted on "whales," as the Apostles referred to their quasi-sacramental sardines-on-toast, which were served in lieu of the original anchovies.²³

Topics of discussion ranged from parapsychology to Fabian socialism. Cleverness and wit counted in addressing such philosophically profound issues as "Why we like nature," "Is this an awkward age?," "Must a picture be intelligible?," and "Shall we elect God a member?" By this time the society, according to a paper on its history read to the members in 1985, was "agnostic in religion and liberal in politics."²⁴

The society had already become something of a sanctuary for homosexual discussion after Oscar Wilde's trial and conviction for sodomy in 1895. That was the year in which Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, a leading exponent of "romantic friendship" between older and younger men, became an Apostle. Goldie, as he was known to E. M. Forster and other admirers, was an inspiring Hellenist who subscribed to Socrates's teaching "that the love for men is of a higher kind than that for women." This contrasted oddly with his desire for humiliation by young men wearing boots. Not surprisingly his romantic affairs with a succession of undergraduates invariably ended in anguish.²⁵

Platonic affairs between members of the society were regarded by homosexuals such as Dickinson as one path to the "good states of mind" preached by the Apostles' philosopher George Moore. But a distinct change had overtaken the society by the turn of the century; the members no longer discussed politics but became "obsessed by homosexuality," which was "discussed in terms of Moore's criterion that good states of mind involved the contemplation of art or of the beloved object." It was Lytton Strachey who persuaded the brethren that it was silly and affected to talk of a love that dared not speak its name. Breaking with Dickinson's idea of romantic love, Strachey and his homosexual confrere Keynes pursued what they called "the higher sodomy."

Keynes, who would later dismay homosexual brethren by marrying the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova, conceded that his generation of Apostles had repudiated "customary conventions and traditional wisdom" to become "in the strict sense of the term immoralists." He and Strachey regarded the Apostles as their special preserve for the pursuit of that "true combination of passion and intellect." According to the records, "birth" became difficult, with only seven members elected between 1903 and 1911. Male beauty and homosexual inclination became a qualification for embryos, as Strachey and Keynes competed for the