

A Student Celebration in 1857: "Account of the Class Supper and how it came off"

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Abstract

The 'Class supper' described in this article is the end of academic year dinner described in a manuscript notebook by 18-year old John Duncan in 1857. Duncan was a 3rd year student at the University of Marischal College in Aberdeen, Scotland. Apart from being a rare account of an incident in mid19th century student life written as a diary entry by a student, the account has additional interest for historians of physics, for the class was the first class that James Clerk Maxwell taught as a Professor. Unlike many mature accounts of the period, there is no attempt to hide the participants' names. Much history of physics emphasises the lasting achievements of the participants. Not so this piece. An introduction sets the background. The bulk of the article is the transcript of the manuscript, with footnotes added giving details of the places and people described. The account is ornamented by ten sketches drawn by Duncan.

Introduction

The following narrative is contained in two soft-covered notebooks¹ in the University of Aberdeen Special Collections. The participants are the tertian class (the third year of a 4-year degree course) at Marischal College at the end of the session 1856-57. This was the first class that James Clerk Maxwell taught at Marischal College. It is likely the events described took place in early April 1857. Maxwell does not feature but the 20 students mentioned by name can be found in the list of his enrolled students in that year². Most of the students involved were in the age range sixteen-and-a-half to twenty. Further details of their background, their subsequent careers and in many cases their adult appearance can be found in a separate article by the author³. One-line summaries are included in the footnotes here.

The first notebook contains the beginning of the story, apparently in draft, and in addition some pencil sketches and some pen sketches not directly relating to the story. In the picture here of the College quadrangle, a first-year student (the *bajan*) is hit by a snowball in the absence of the sacrist, John Cooper. The second notebook contains



the whole story followed by further pen sketches relating to the story that are included in this account. The narrative has all the hallmarks of a true account: it reads as if written by a

student; the people and places existed; the author's reputation is not enhanced; in my experience, the events bear a clear resemblance to student behaviour a century or more later! Academic accounts of University education in past centuries centre on University history, the professors, the coursework, the careers of successful students. This contemporary account written by a student in the 1850s is a refreshing reminder that student life was laced with other dimensions seldom recorded then at first hand, though sometimes mentioned in reminiscences.

Marischal College was founded as a post reformation university in 1593, located near the centre of Aberdeen adjacent to Broad Street. By 1856 the College occupied an impressive granite building that was less than 20 years old, designed by the notable architect Archibald Simpson. The 21st century college buildings are similar to those



seen by Maxwell and his students though the premises were enlarged in the 1890s, most conspicuously almost doubling the height of the quadrangle tower. In the early 20th century a large ornate granite façade with a new entrance archway was added. All these features can be seen today, though the University has withdrawn from much of the building and leased it to the Town Council. The sketch above shows a snowball fight, likely in Broad Street just outside the College.

The notebook appears to be by John Duncan⁴, whose name and address of 263 Union Street⁵ is near the beginning and his name is also above one of the pencil sketches. In the sketch here, the scrap book of James Shand Stuart⁶ (one of the oldest in the class) is being circulated. Duncan's handwriting is generally good, though a few words are unclear. I have kept the spelling and punctuation of the original.



The narrative

"Account of the Class Supper and how it came off"

Last night as we perambulated Union Street, along with our friend Crombie⁷, we were in momentary dread of being taken with some violent fit of apoplexy or some other equally delightful sort of thing, from the continued starts given us at almost every corner by the appearance of some number or other of the third class who seemed to have laid in wait for the express purpose of surprising us by rushing out upon us. - Happily, however, Union St. has an end and then we dived up the Lemon Tree Close⁸, and, in a wild manner, sprung up the stairs, to the evident astonishment of the waiters and waitresses – to whom, by the way, some of the faster sort of fellows actually winked.

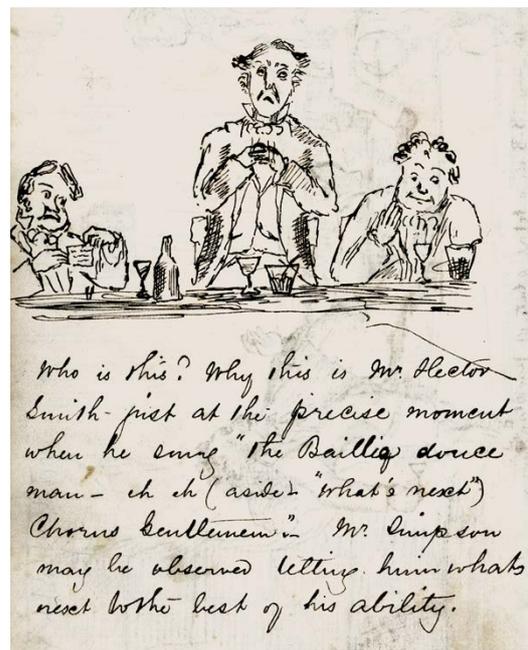
It is very questionable whether we shall ever recover from the stifling heat of the waiting room, where we found the members grouped all around, making insane attempts to appear at their ease, but, in fact, only making their uneasiness more apparent, - which, we trust, will account for any remarkable performances, on our part, during the evening.

By and by our mathematical friend Hutchison⁹ began to form our arithmetical series of the fellows, having a constant increasing ratio of 1, and a product of 28, which he worked out to his own satisfaction. “Supper traits”. There must have been magic in these two words, for immediately we found ourselves projected into the passage, and carried along into the supper room, until we found ourselves staring vacantly on a pigeon pie, with but a dim idea of how we happened to come there.

Mr Mackie, the croupier, said grace in a most solemn manner, and, then – By Jove! what a row! The knives and forks clattering tremendously on the plates amid a regular Babel of tongues. How shall we attempt to tell how pies, turkeys, tongues, roasts, &c. disappeared rapidly before the tremendous appetites of the party, how tarts, prunes, jellies, pastries of every sort followed the same way, and how besides all, oranges, apples, and cheese still contrived to reach the same description. We’d far rather leave it to imagination, presuming always that that imagination be of a very glowing description. Jocs¹⁰ of whisky were then tabled and brews were concocted by every one. The Chairman¹¹ in most eloquent language proposed the health of the students of the 3rd class. (Drunk amongst cheers and shoutings).

Mr R. Simpson¹² who by this time had opened some half dozen buttons¹³, now fairly gave in and retired to the sofa where he lay moaning in a most pitiable manner.

The Chairman next most loyally proposed her most Gracious Majesty the Queen and her hopeful progressing¹⁴ and with three times three and one more another bumper followed the first. Mr Mackay¹⁵ next, after various unintelligible winks and nods to the Chairman, stood up and proposed the “coming man” (cheers, &c). A most distinct veto having been put upon smoking in the supper room, we managed to reach the



waiting Room along with some other parties and there indulged in a quick weed. During our absence McKay sung "My boy Farming"¹⁶ putting on his piano and forte stops most triumphantly.

Mr Burr¹⁷, - who had been observed with a paper in his hand – swaying to and fro – (D...¹⁸ says 'from a too free attack upon a strong ale') – after carefully entrusting his paper to Mr Morrice¹⁹, elevated himself to a standing position and then delivered himself of the "army and navy" in a way which strongly reminded us of his manner of answering Dr Cruickshank's mathematical questions in the class, - that is, with not an over clear idea of what he was saying.

Mr Chalmers in an able speech returned thanks and then Mr Hector Smith²⁰ was called on for a song. Now we had noticed Mr Smith for some time previous, gazing at nothing in particular in a most earnest manner, but he was himself again when he stood up – The song was "Bonnie Dundee", but either the tune must have been changed – probably an amended edition by Mr Smith or we must have been uncommonly far gone, for not one blessed note of the right air did we hear. Mr S., however, called upon us impressively for "Chorus, Gentleman", which we gave as well as we could for laughter. We are of opinion that Mr S. enjoyed the song himself quite as well as any one, tho' in a different way. We have an idea that we ourselves were called on for a toast about this time, at any rate we found ourselves to be standing and saying something in a confused manner about "The Ladies". – We have a distinct recollection of remarking, in a dictatorial sort of way, that "the world was a wilderness" here for some time we were at a standstill till the remainder of the quotation flashed across our minds "the garden a wild, And man, the hermit sighed, till woman smiled"²¹. Then a most benignant smile illumined our countenance, after which we found ourselves gulping down toddy in an insane manner, amidst some cheering.

Mr Wilson²² then informed us in a song that he saw "a whale, a whale" brave boys with "a fol-ol-ol-alol - a fol a lol a lol." And that his Captain "a short square man was he, brave boys with a fol a lol a lol, with a fol, a lol a lol" and much to our delight and edification Mr Milne²³ then toasted the "Professors", including "that venerable old man whose hair is whitened with 70 winters" (a voice "there's noise in the corner there") "I mean our beloved Dr Brown" &c. To which Mr R. Simpson said "thank you". We again found ourselves on our pins singing how "a young man on his deathbed lay for the love of Barbara Allen"²⁴, strongly enforcing the necessity of Chorus, "for the love of Barbara Allen."

More speeches and then Mr Robertson²⁵ sung with considerable gusto "that he was a pirate bold" and he would "cross the seas for gold", - and all in a most bloodthirsty manner.

About this time a whisper went around of "Ecce Pluto"²⁶ and sure enough there he was stepping across the room like a cat with stockings on and subsiding into a seat beside Mr Chalmers with a profusion of nods and winks.-

His health was proposed by Mr Duguid²⁷ – who seemed to have considerable difficulty in keeping his equilibrium – and Mr John replied in a conglomeration of bad grammar, introducing a few sarcastic remarks at the Broad Street Academy²⁸.

Mssrs Thompson²⁹ and Fowlie³⁰ then gave us "Lillie Dale"³¹ and we distinctly saw Mr H. Smith drop two tears to her memory.

Mr R. Simpson insisted then on singing "Bobbing Around" with us which must have been very pleasant to the ears seeing that he sung almost half an octave lower than us, interspersing it with various new and original notes. Speeches again and then Mr Wilson gave us "The Bay of Biscay O"³² in a very nautical manner after which Mr Mackay gave us the interesting information that the "young Lochinvar has come out of the west"³³ and that "he quaffed up the wine and then threw down the cup" all in account of his being "so daring in love, so dauntless in war." –



As Mr Hutchison seemed impressed with the idea that we were tipsy we determined to convince him that he was right so we started up and exclaimed that "all the fellows were singing sea songs but By Jove I'm a lands man and I'll sing you a land song." And then in a violent haste commenced a lamentation that the "men" wouldn't "propose mamma" ending off each verse with a succession of shouts to "Mamma, Mamma why don't the men propose."³⁴ During this Mr H persisted on tilting our coat in a concealed manner with requests to "oh be quiet John" &c ending in a hopeless despair for our wellbeing. B. Bobby³⁵, about this time, after having in vain attempted to discover his mouth on the table got excited at last and shied his glass down thus breaking it. Kennedy³⁶ then after a few futile attempts, succeeded in breaking off the back of his chair which seemed highly to disgust his mind. – This caused a breaking up of the meeting and after several loud and continued cheers



we parted³⁷.

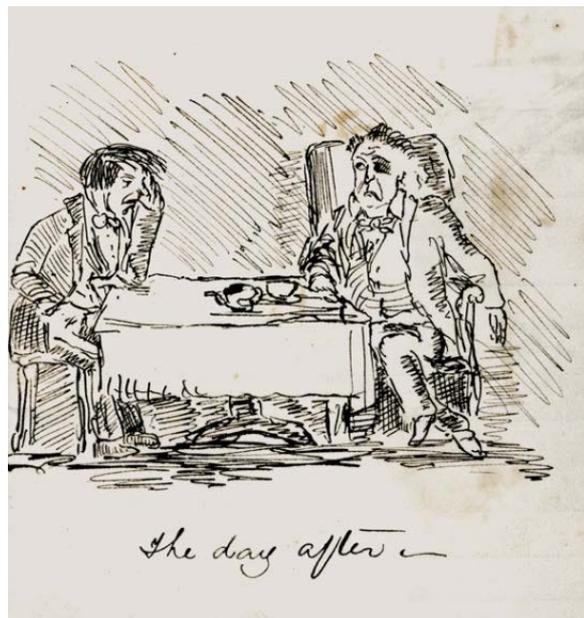
We have been endeavouring to find out why everyone seemed particularly anxious to see us safe home; we are not sensible to having required it more than anyone else. We shall never forget the care Mr Garden³⁸ took of us, insisting on helping us up the street and in the most patronising and paternal manner beseeching us just to come home. We have a faint recollection of wondering what was the reason of everything attempting to walk upside down, even our grave friend Mr Hutchison actually tried to walk up Union Street on his hands and with considerable success. As we went along we took a turn up Crown Street and there – I grieve to write it – distinctly saw Mr James Duncan³⁹ actually reeling up the Street. He



came up to us and inflicted on us a most affectionate embrace, and expressed his opinion that we were "a jolly good fellow", and then departed in his way rejoicing. We have been told that Mr Milne was seen vowing eternal friendship to various watchmen and was kindly assisted home by one. On retiring to our couch we were soon in the land of sommeil but shortly we awoke with an overpowering idea that our head was below our oven and that we were hugging it there to an immense extent. This nightmare soon departed and we slumbered soundly and well until the morning when a bathe in the sea

put us all to rights again.

We caught Mr Crombie several times muttering to himself and chuckling in a private manner and at last discovered the burden of his speech to be "By Jove, this is what I call being fast. Ha John, you dog, you're a horrible rake turning, you are!!!!" We observed with regret that our poetical friend J.S.S. Deskford was not amongst us but doubtless he had been too busy "packing his books aside" preparing



to a “glide” to the station⁴⁰ or it may be that he was engaged on the composition of some new poem which is to shed everlasting lustre on his remarkable trousers. Mr James Smith⁴¹ – we forgot too he came in Mr Cooper’s⁴² place, and got completely intoxicated on sugar and hot water which he imbibed with great seeming pleasure, whether it was the potency of the sugar, or the tremendous amount of supper he stowed away, that upset him must be a matter of uncertainty, unless Mr Smith himself elucidates the point.

We have had the following effusion handed to us. It is in imitation of the tale of Reuben Wright and Phoebe Brown or a tale of the Dismal Swamp⁴³.

Conclusion

The ‘effusion’ mentioned in the final paragraph was a set of verses that repeated isolated events in the above account. They contain a few points of added detail, mentioned in the footnotes, but are not worth repeating here.

I would like to thank University of Aberdeen Special Collections staff for their help and for scanning the sketches.

¹ University of Aberdeen Special Collections MS3911/2 and /3. The footnotes here are not in the original manuscript.

² Peter John Anderson “Fasti Academiae Mariscallanae Aberdonensis” Vol II, pp 565 – 569, (The Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1898)

³ John S. Reid “James Clerk Maxwell’s class of 1856/57” <http://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1504/1504.07587.pdf>.

⁴ John Duncan, son of an Aberdeen advocate. Career in commercial finance, 20 years in Ceylon and then in New Zealand.

⁵ Union Street is Aberdeen’s main thoroughfare. No. 263 is near the junction with Bon Accord Street.

⁶ James Shand Stuart, farmer’s son from Morayshire who became a General Practitioner.

⁷ John Crombie, son of an Aberdeen textile manufacturer whose business he continued.

⁸ The Lemon Tree Inn was a popular meeting place in the 18th and 19th centuries. Lemon Tree Close existed before Union Street was laid out in 1801. It was on the North side of Castle Street, and is shown on Alex. Milne’s 1789 plan of Aberdeen. The original Lemon Tree Inn was demolished in the 1870s but the name lives on in the Aberdeen Performing Arts centre.

⁹ Alfred Hutchison, son of a Peterhead merchant. He made a career in the tea export business in China.

¹⁰ The Ms word here is unclear but this could be a vernacular word for a tumbler of whisky.

¹¹ Elsewhere in the notebook identified as Patrick Chalmers son of an Advocate. He followed in his father’s footsteps as a successful Aberdeen Advocate. The vice-chair was Alexander Cochran, who likewise was the son of an Advocate and followed the same career.

¹² Robert Simpson, son of the manse. Career in the Honourable East India Company military.

¹³ Of his waistcoat.

¹⁴ Presumed a reference to the imminent birth of Princess Beatrice, the 9th and final child of Queen Victoria, born on 14th April 1857.

¹⁵ James Mackie, farmer’s son from Laurencekirk. Career as a minister of the church.

¹⁶ The word “farming” is indistinct. Possibly the popular song “The Farmer’s Boy”.

¹⁷ James Burr, Aberdeenshire farmer’s son. Career as a doctor.

¹⁸ Name written but not clear.

¹⁹ George Morice, son of an Edinburgh physician. Career as a minister of the church, mainly in New Zealand.

²⁰ Hector William Pope Smith, a private student and son of a Caithness landowner. He became a sheep farmer in New Zealand.

²¹ From Thomas Campbell’s extended poem ‘Pleasures of Hope’.

²² William Wilson son of an Ayr merchant. Career in the Civil Service of India.

²³ Joseph Milne, farmer’s son from Kincardineshire. Career as a minister of the Church of Scotland.

²⁴ Traditional song from the 17th century, still comparatively well-known.

²⁵ John Robertson, son of an Aberdeen ironmonger. Career in the Civil Service of India.

²⁶ John Cooper, the Marischal College Sacrist.

²⁷ William Duguid, Aberdeenshire farmer’s son. Career as a doctor in Aberdeenshire.

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- ²⁸ The slang name for Marischal College.
- ²⁹ Alexander Thomson, Banffshire farmer's son. Became a schoolmaster but died young.
- ³⁰ Alexander Fowlie, Aberdeenshire farmer's son. Became an Aberdeenshire schoolmaster.
- ³¹ "Lilly Dale" was a popular American song of the 1850s by H S Thompson.
- ³² A still popular dramatic song from the late 18th or early 19th century about a shipwreck.
- ³³ Walter Scott's famous poem "Lochinvar".
- ³⁴ A rendition of *Why Don't the Men Propose, Mamma* by Thomas Haynes Bayly.
- ³⁵ Possibly a nickname for William Robert Duguid, op. cit. ref.²⁷
- ³⁶ William Kennedy, Aberdeenshire farmer's son, is recorded as being in the cohort only in first and second years, yet he graduated as a Batchelor of Medicine in 1860. The record may be in error.
- ³⁷ The subsequent poem says this happened at 11 pm.
- ³⁸ Farquharson Garden, Surgeon's son from Aberdeenshire. Career as an Aberdeen lawyer.
- ³⁹ James Duncan son of an Arbroath merchant. Entered the Church of England and became a Canon at Canterbury Cathedral.
- ⁴⁰ This likely refers to James Shand Stuart from Morayshire. The end of the notebook contains an 8-verse poem dated 27th Feb '57 entitled "*Home and the Country*". The text refers to line 7. Verses 1 and 2 are:

*'Tis to thee sweet home, that I long to come,
But the time is drawing near,
That shall set me free, and I'll come to thee
To me no place half so dear.*

*Once the Session o'er, I shall long no more
But I'll throw off my Red Gown;
Pack my books aside, to the station glide,
And bid farewell to the town.*

The poem is accompanied by wry footnotes almost certainly from Duncan in which the poet's home is imputed to be at Deskford (in Morayshire). There is a comment that the poet is likely to have 'his trousers half way up his legs, in the usual manner'.

- ⁴¹ James Smith, son of Aberdeenshire farmer. Studied divinity, went to India but became mentally ill.
- ⁴² Charles Cooper, son of Aberdeenshire farmer. Entered the United Presbyterian church and in 1869 translated to Madras.
- ⁴³ A popular musical hall song of 1855.