PRANKS AND PUNISHMENT IN AN OLD PENNSYLVANIA COLLEGE

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When the “Old Main” building at Mercersburg Academy burned in 1927, many valuable records relating to the history of old Marshall College, of which the present famous academy is the lineal descendant, were destroyed. Fortunately, however, many other documents relating to Marshall College had previously been transferred to the library of Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, where they form an unusually rich mine of material for the student both of Pennsylvania educational history and of the social life and manners of the fourth and fifth decades of the last century. Among them is the original minute-book of the Marshall College faculty, a relic of a by-gone day in higher education which deserves the attention of students of history.

Marshall College had a distinguished career, though straitened circumstances ended its independent existence after only seventeen years; and its mainstays, Frederick Augustus Rauch, Traill Green, Philip Schaff, and Samuel W. Budd, were as brilliant scholars as the country held in the 1840’s. Mirrored in the record of their proceedings as a college faculty, however, the lofty thinkers of Mercersburg lose some of their solemnity as we watch them grappling ineffectually with the bugaboo of student discipline. We are afforded entertaining glimpses not only of the exasperations of the unworldly men who founded that stout-hearted educational experiment in the Blue Mountains but also of the uninhibited youths of many of Pennsylvania’s leading citizens; for such men as Thomas A. Hendricks, Vice-President of the United States; Senator John Scott; Governor John F. Hartranft; Congressmen John Cessna and J. W. Killinger; and presidents of the Reformed Theological Seminary, Franklin and Marshall College, and Ursinus College were “old Marshall boys.” And more than that, the successive secretaries of the faculty wrote in these pages, though unwittingly, a highly informative commentary on the incidents and
conditions of small-college life a century ago, whose value extends far beyond the confines of the history of one institution.

From the faculty minute-book I have selected material relating only to the escapades of the unruly students. There are other things dealt with in these pages, of course; but no topic recurs more frequently than that of student discipline. Although the first president of Marshall College, Dr. Rauch, was the author of one of the first American textbooks on psychology, he and his colleagues faced the perplexities of discipline in complete ignorance of the modern science of behavior. And since they had spent their lives buried in books, they also lacked the next best thing: first-hand experience with human nature. They were churchmen rather than educators, and their deep piousness furnished them with a clumsy defense indeed against the high spirited deviltry of their students. Rauch and his early colleague Budd both died at the age of thirty-five, from over-work aggravated, as we may surmise, by disciplinary worries; while, on the other hand, a later Marshall College professor, who had been an infidel in his youth, and "had sometime stood up and prated the most advanced infidel views in Tammany Hall, New York," then had been converted to Roman Catholicism, and finally sought peace in the bosom of the German Reformed Church, was apparently too busy meditating terrible polemics against Papism to bother about student misdemeanors.

The boys were never at a loss for things to do. The ramshackle building that housed the preparatory department during its first years burned one night. It was never decided whether the building had been set afire for the purpose of cooking chickens stolen by hungry "preps" from local roosts, or whether a group of students were gambling late at night and when their candles went out resorted to the simple expedient of lighting a corner of the building to provide illumination for the continuation of their game.

Other offenses included throwing a pail of water down the stairs of the college building; firing a pistol in the college edifice (the suspect in this case was discharged with an admonition, there being no admissible evidence against him except that he was found hiding in the room from which the noise came); and disturbing the meeting of one of the literary societies by throwing a piece of wood down the steps. The culprits involved in this last affair almost got off, but someone on the faculty, more alert than usual, detected
a flaw in their glib alibi and they were fined jointly a dollar. One of them had even worse luck not long afterward, when he was suspended indefinitely for blowing a horn during study hours.

One of the students complained to the faculty of "rude behavior on the part of several students, while he was gallanting a company of ladies through the building last Saturday. The young gentlemen charged with the offense were brought up and admonished." Others were charged with abandoning classes in order to go to the circus. Another committed the serious offense of posting up, apparently for public ridicule, a note left in his room by one of the instructors. Several more staged a fake duel which the faculty insisted upon taking seriously.

Then, as now, one of the chief sources of worry to the faculty was old John Barleycorn. Liquor evidently had strong attractions in that sleepy mountain hamlet, even for boys the majority of whom were preparing for the ministry. On one occasion the faculty made strong representations to one of the town's leading citizens, who was selling liquor to college boys whenever they called for it. In 1850 several students "were reported to the Faculty as having been assembled on Friday night last, after nine o'clock (study hours) in Mr. Champney's room, having a bucket full of egg-nog of which they were partaking." The host, who was later to become an eminent jurist, and another member of the party were suspended from the institution. A few months previous to this "Messrs. Hall and Shoemaker, having been present with a riotous party who showed off their orgies around the boarding house of Mrs. Hassler last night, and Mr. Wolf for having gone into the tavern and taken his glass of wine," were deprived of their degrees. However (and this is typical of the forgiveness of the faculty) five days later they expressed penitence before the professors and were awarded their diplomas.

During the recess of Christmas, 1852, one of the students received a Christmas box from a friend at a distance—"a box containing sundry articles and among the rest a bottle of wine. His friends called in and some of them (not, however, himself) had drunk to intoxication." He who became most offensively tipsy was publicly rebuked and censured. The other wine bibbers were "solemnly warned and cautioned by the president."
The faculty made their task all the harder by the complicated system of punishment they used—a system as intricate and arbitrary as the modern machinery of college credits. "Censures," "admonitions," "public rebukes," and other penalties were included in a carefully and subtly graded scale which, theoretically at least, provided punishment in exact proportion to the seriousness of the offense. Thus in the case of the participants in "the fray which took place last Saturday night, after ten o'clock, between some of the students of the college and some of the Mechanics of the town," the following punishments were meted out, not, as we suspect, without a great deal of solemn deliberation:

Messrs. Gray and Dubbs, "tho' not engaged in the fray, [were] both slightly censured for being on the street as spectators in study hours. . . . In the case of Mr. Dubbs too the Faculty thought it wrong in him that earlier in the evening, he had taken the least notice whatever of an insult, the blowing of tobacco smoke on his face, as he passed him in the street, by a low fellow of the town; the notice in all such cases being more gratifying to such low fellows than an overlooking of them altogether.

"Mr. Patterson having been more intimately connected with the fray, though without striking, it was resolved that his censure in proportion be more severe.

"Mr. George King on account of his having been even more intimately engaged in the affray, even to fighting, . . . was indefinitely suspended.

"Mr. Shell, though not more deeply engaged in the affair than some of the others, on account of his general conduct was requested and commanded to leave the institution."

In leafing through the minutes of this faculty of theologians turned inquisitors one is impressed, too, by the hopelessness of their quest for information tending to establish the guilt of the accused. We read that on January 31, 1839 "Mr. Wolf was questioned as to powder known to be in his room, but no information of consequence was obtained." As there is no further mention of Mr. Wolf's quaint whim of turning his room into a miniature arsenal, evidently the faculty gave up in despair. They leaned over backwards in their desire to administer absolute justice. In 1839 five students were accused of throwing crockery down the chimney from the cupola of the building, thereby disrupting classes.
Though to a skeptical modern observer the evidence against them seems complete in every detail, despite their protestations of innocence, the secretary of the faculty reported, "There... appeared a possibility that the young men might not be attempting to deceive the faculty and it was therefore finally resolved that no punishment could be inflicted upon them excepting a general reproof for being absent from their rooms in study hours and being in the cupola without permission. And on general grounds it was also resolved that the five young men should be at the expense of replacing the door" which the tutor had been obliged to break down in order to get to the embattled culprits in the cupola. "And," finished the secretary, "the case was dismissed."

It was not the last time, however, that the faculty was to see one of the miscreants, an interesting lad named Peter Stout. Peter's police-record in Marshall College runs substantially like this:

1. Threw crockery down the chimney, as mentioned above. Dismissed.
2. Nine months later: broke windows in the building. Faculty took no action.
3. Two days later: intoxicated. Ordered to be confined for a week without dinner and deprived of pocket money for all the rest of the session.
4. Three weeks later: went to Greencastle and got royally drunk. After considerable sober discussion, "it was agreed by the Faculty that a boy of his age upon whom moral restraints were so little binding would probably soon be ruined if allowed to continue in the course he had been pursuing for some time past. And it was therefore resolved to request his parents to remove him without delay." Unfortunately history does not record whether the grim prediction of the harassed faculty was fulfilled and whether Peter Stout ended his career on the gallows.

Whatever their professional views on the subject of human depravity, the members of the faculty seemed never to question the credibility of their witnesses. The boys told the most bare-faced lies and were implicitly believed. There was a cause célèbre in 1839 when the bed-cords of the roll-keeper were mysteriously cut. "After much conversation as to the frequency of disorders lately it was thought the Faculty should not suffer these instances
to pass without some notice,” and accordingly the two alleged ring-
leaders in the disorder were rusticated for three weeks. But two
days later the sentence was revoked—on the basis of the testimony
of the student whose name appears most frequently of all on this
academic police-blotter, who had been in a serious fist-fight, as
well as a duel, whose room had been the center of recurrent dis-
orders, and who (there can be no doubt on the point, the evidence
is so clear) was a confirmed liar!

Only once in a long while did the faculty show glimmers of
understanding student nature; but on one occasion they produced
a classic dictum to which twentieth-century teachers will utter a
hearty amen. In refusing to grant the students a recess of one
or two weeks around Christmas and New Year’s, they expressed
themselves as being “well aware that the minds of students are
relaxed not only during the days of a recess, which would be well
enough, but also a week preceding from anticipation, and that they
continue relaxed at least a week afterwards from remembrance.”

But in the great majority of instances these dreamy educators’
naïveté and credulity were amazing. They were solicitous above
all, of course, for the students’ spiritual welfare. Hence it was
that certain cynics among the students looked with suspicion upon
the sudden and very loud conversion of one of their number,
“probably the most depraved in the institution,” who had attended
a revival meeting in town and got religion. “Prayer meetings were
held for his benefit; other students, some of his companions, be-
came affected; the mourner’s bench was called into requisition”;
the whole college circle seemed to share this sinner’s repentance.
But he soon returned to his erring ways, and “in the end it was
gravely suspected that his pretended seriousness was all a ruse
to escape the discipline of the Faculty, which he had good reason
to believe was impending over him at the time.”

Of all the diverting episodes of middle nineteenth-century col-
lege life which are shadowed in the faculty minutes of Marshall
College, episodes which included the persecution of a luckless
abolitionist who had wandered into Mercersburg, which lay too
close to the Mason-Dixon Line for comfort, few tease the imagi-
nation more than that which is recorded in these two brief entries,
both dated January 11, 1848: “It was resolved . . . that Mr.
Schnebly of the Preparatory, for gambling on the sabbath with a
negro barber, and for leaving the Institution without permission be indefinitely suspended.” And, “Messrs. Miller and Messimer . . . were found . . . to have been implicated, at least in some degree, with Mr. George King, a suspended student, in the assault and battery on the colored barber, above mentioned, after the departure of Mr. Schnebly.” One would give much to know the exact nature of the unfortunate barber’s offense—whether he was too sharp for the novices, or whether he turned informer after he was worsted. And was it a quiet session of poker (as befitted the academic gown) or a slightly more vulgar crap-game?

And then there was the affair of the “cracked” Hungarian. In 1847, “A petition was presented, signed by nearly all the students, praying for the removal from ‘The Building’ of Mr. Broatsic, a Hungarian of considerable learning but cracked intellect, who intruded himself about a year ago into the building, and latterly has been occupying one of the recitation rooms, as his sleeping apartment—whom they consider as a dangerous person, and a perfect nuisance. On motion of Prof. Baird it was resolved that Mr. Broatsic be required to leave the building forthwith.”

Thus are recounted the trials and tribulations of a college faculty who trod with God, but were often at a loss when it came to dealing with students. The story of their perpetual, invariably losing battle with their pupils is as pathetic as it is amusing; and as for the students themselves, we may, I think, safely conclude that between negro barbers and “cracked” Hungarians, life at old Marshall College was seldom very dull.