The Anchor Club
Defender of Federalism

In the bitter Federalist-Republican feud which convulsed Philadelphia during the closing years of the eighteenth century, the Federalists, although more conservative, matched almost every device employed by the Republicans to further their cause. Where the Republicans wore the liberty cap, the Federalists sported the black cockade; where the Jacobins toasted France, liberty, equality, and fraternity, the Federalists drank to Lord Nelson’s victory and to Washington. The Federalist Philadelphia Grenadiers rivaled the sartorial splendor of the Republican parade groups. And the Federalist Gazette of the United States waged journalistic war with the Republican National Gazette and the Aurora. In the formation of political societies, however, the Federalists failed to follow the example of their adversaries. Perhaps scorning such vulgar democratic methods, they formed no effective organizations to counter groups like the Tammany Society, the Democratic Society, and the Société Française des Amis de l’Égalité, which did much to promote the Gallic frenzy.1

The only Federalist society which appears to have existed in Philadelphia was an organization known as the “Anchor Club.” The life of this society was so brief and its activities were so shrouded in secrecy that no mention is made of it even in the most detailed studies of the period, and few students of American history are aware that it existed.

Only fragmentary details concerning the membership and activities of the Anchor Club are available. Composed of arch-Federalists, it seems to have been an informal organization with a limited membership whose political efforts were primarily of a literary nature. The only account of the Anchor Club which the writer has been able to discover is a brief description by John Ward Fenno, publisher of the Gazette of the United States, who was presumably a member. According to Fenno, the organization was “an association of a small

1 See Eugene P. Link, Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790–1800 (New York, 1942).
band of literary gentlemen, in which social purposes were combined with that of producing a disposition in the public mind towards war with France."

The identity of the members was so well concealed, says Fenno, that the Jacobin newspapers, which frequently attacked various persons because of alleged membership, were unable to identify a single member. The general purpose of the Anchor Club is described as follows: "The public objects of this institution were confined to a general defence of the Government against its enemies, which was conceived to admit of more efficacious execution by urging to a war with the French Republic, than by any other."

The Anchor Club first came to public notice on January 21, 1799, when the Gazette of the United States carried an article entitled "From the Anchor Club" and signed with the letter "E." Three days later another article appeared, this one headed by an anchor entwined with a rope. For the next few months, there appeared a series of articles and a verse satire; some of these were signed "Coriolanus," or with the letters "E," "W," or "S," and some were unsigned. The exact number of literary efforts attributable to the society cannot be determined; occasionally the Gazette of the United States carried articles which were not headed by the identifying title and symbolic anchor, but which bore the same pseudonymous signatures and were similar in style and subject matter to positively identifiable pieces. It seems probable that the writings of the Anchor Club exceeded the dozen prose articles and two poems which were definitely identified.

There is, of course, the possibility that the Anchor Club was merely an editorial device employed by Fenno, and that no real organization existed. This, however, seems unlikely. In the first place, Fenno's account of the Anchor Club was written in 1800, approximately one year after the last Anchor Club publication appeared and at a time when the Federalist cause was a lost one. Thus Fenno would have had little to gain by perpetuating a fiction. Secondly, the satirical reference of the Republican Aurora to the Anchor Club as the "Gong Club" may be interpreted as an allusion to the fact that the

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2 John Ward Fenno, ed., Poems, Chiefly Occasional, By the Late Mr. Clifton . . . (New York, 1800), xvi.

3 Ibid., xvi-xvii.

4 The significance of the name of the organization is explained by a passage in an early article: "Our vessel of state is under a leeshore; and the only anchor that can hold her is foul." Gazette of the United States, Feb. 19, 1799.
organization was a kind of luncheon club which, as Fenno asserted, combined "social purposes" with its journalistic activities. Moreover, the Aurora, in an article printed two months after the last Anchor Club publication, referred to the Anchor Club as a "remnant of the self created societies" and as an "association," and stated that its "members" were "in the British line." It is hardly probable that the editor of the Aurora would have been deceived so long by a commonplace editorial device. In view of these considerations, there appears to be little reason for questioning the existence of an actual club.

The only contributor to the political writings of the Anchor Club of whom we can be certain is William Cliffton. Born in 1771 of Quaker parents, Cliffton began to write at an early age, and despite a brief life of semi-invalidism induced by tuberculosis, he produced a remarkable quantity of light verse and political satire. He received the praise of such critics as Gulian Verplanck, Charles Brockden Brown, and William Cullen Bryant; and one student of the cultural history of Philadelphia called him the "American Dryden" and "the real and only true poet of this period." In spite of his infirmity, he took an active part in the cultural and political life of Philadelphia. A zealous Federalist, he first turned his pen against the Republicans in 1796 with the publication of "The Group," a lengthy, scathing satire of minor public officials in particular and of democrats and Jacobins in general. From this point until his death in 1799, Cliffton produced numerous pieces of verse and prose in the Federalist cause. His contributions to the Anchor Club, as far as can be determined, consisted of two prose articles and a long verse satire entitled "Talleyrand's Descent into Hell." The articles deal with the importance of building a strong navy, and the poem is an amusing, sometimes effective, attack upon Talleyrand, the revolutionaries, and the Directory.

5 Nov. 13, 1799; Poems, Chiefly Occasional . . . , xvi.
6 May 8, 1799.
9 Fenno wrote that "'Talleyrand's Descent' and a few papers on the importance and necessity of a naval establishment were the contributions of Cliffton." The writer has assumed that the articles which were signed "S," the signature used after "Talleyrand's Descent," which is known to be Cliffton's, are also his work. "Talleyrand's Descent" was included in the volume of Cliffton's poems edited by Fenno and published in 1800.
It is possible that the splenetic, vituperative William Cobbett, better known as "Peter Porcupine," was also a member of the Anchor Club. Whether he was responsible for any of the society's writings, we cannot tell, but certainly his sympathies—either from spite or conviction—were with the extreme Federalists. In his pamphlets and newspaper, he hurled many a poisoned quill at democrats, Jacobins, and any and all who were inimical to Britain. Additional reasons why he may have been one of the "literary gentlemen" of the Anchor Club are his friendship with Cliffton and Fenno and the publication in his Porcupine's Gazette of seven of the Anchor Club articles, as well as "Talleyrand's Descent into Hell."\(^{10}\)

Although the purpose of the Anchor Club, according to Fenno, was to initiate war with France, the articles are not devoted exclusively to that end, and they cover a variety of topics. Much of the writing seems to have been prompted by impatience with what was regarded as Adams' tame and temporizing policy toward France, but many of the articles are appeals for support of broad, general ideas, such as Hamilton's plan for an industrial, commercial America. The first essay is an extensive defense of Jay's Treaty and an exhortation to resistance of France's demand for tribute. Subsequent articles defend Federalist principles, attack the wisdom of Jefferson's agrarianism and anticommercialism, point out the importance of commerce to a nation and the need for protecting that commerce, and urge the abandonment of a "soft" policy toward an aggressive, unfriendly France. Several pieces point out the dangers of democratic enthusiasm, one is directed against the United Irishmen, and another is in the form of an open letter addressed "To John Taylor, of Virginia, author of an Insolent and Seditious address to the People."

One of the notable characteristics of the Anchor Club articles is their relatively restrained tone. In contrast to the typical vituperative exchanges found in the Republican and Federalist pamphlets and newspapers, these articles indulge little in personal abuse.\(^{11}\) Thus Cliffton, while attempting to refute Jefferson's arguments, avoids the customary name-calling and attacks upon person; instead, he resorts

\(^{10}\) See William Cobbett, Porcupine's Works (London, 1801), XI, 120.

\(^{11}\) According to one source on the period, "Probably at no other period of American history, unless it be immediately after the Civil War, has the language of public controversy so constantly hovered on the verge of scurrility." John Allen Krout and Dixon Ryan Fox, The Completion of Independence (New York, 1944), 158.
to a “reasonable” tone and to reference to historic precedent. Only the letter to John Taylor can be put in the same category as the scurrilous political literature which characterized the period.

If the efforts of the Anchor Club were fruitless, it was not because its members were inferior to their adversaries in literary skill. For the most part, the writing is competent; occasionally, it is distinguished. Take, for instance, this highly rhetorical excerpt from a rousing appeal by “Coriolanus” for action against the “enemies of government”:

If rational liberty was ever dear, and anarchy horrible and destructive; if the sacred religion and pure morality of our fathers, was ever revered for its divine authority and benign effects; if laws and customs produced by the accumulated experience of the ages, have ever been useful to mankind; if domestic comfort and social order was [sic] ever enjoyed and duly estimated; if private virtue and public integrity were ever just and honorable; if, in short, all that can render life amiable and desirable,—all that can adorn and exalt civilized humanity,—have ever been duly appreciated, how great should be the alarm, when danger threatens in every shape, and from every quarter?

Perhaps even more effective, by virtue of its restraint and calm tone, is this plea for the formation of a strong navy, the promotion of commerce, and the rejection of Jefferson’s dream of a rural, agricultural America:

A nation, like an individual, if it aspires after greatness; if it hopes to unfold any of those virtues which make humanity amiable, it must throw itself into that field of competition where the faculties of the soul are called forth. It must be practised in its own strength, and strong in its own experience. . . . Mr. Jefferson will tell us perhaps of the pernicious influence of gain and the enervating effects of luxury; that “the cultivators of the earth are the chosen people of God,” and that by commerce many nations have lost their liberty. He will ascertain with great precision the quantity of land necessary for the support of an individual;—calculate what portion of his time may be spent in cultivation, devise sports for the remainder, talk of nature, happiness, and the perfectability [sic] of man, and in the result, produce a system of weak, timid and lifeless society, with as much virtue as may be claimed by the anchorite who flies from the tempests of life to the calm of retirement, and boasts of temperance, continency and innocence.

12 See Gazette of the United States, Jan. 24, 1799.

13 Ibid., Feb. 9, 1799.

14 Ibid., Jan. 24, 1799.
The felicitous phrasing and cogency which mark many of the Anchor Club articles distinguish them from the great bulk of contemporaneous political journalism. Such passages as the following can be read with appreciation even today:

It is time openly to proclaim the truth, that war is an evil only by comparison, and that it is a contingency in the lot of nations, more dangerous to be shunned than sought.

Let us therefore by a firm and unalterable resolution convince mankind that we are ripening into an honest reputation, which at all hazards we are determined to defend and preserve: that our national character is to guard our national rights and honor; that we mingle with calm prudence keen penetration and prompt decision; and that we are not a nation of licentious visionaries and patient victims; but men who know how to estimate the blessings they enjoy and will risk every thing to perpetuate them.

The most ambitious writing published by the Anchor Club was Cliffton’s “Talleyrand’s Descent into Hell,” which ran to more than six thousand words and was published in three installments. In his introduction, Cliffton represented the work as a translation of a manuscript “found among the papers of a French emigrant in London.” Employing a combination of verse and prose, the writer tells how the French Directory, “after having ransacked history for extravagant examples of villainy, inhumanity, cruelty, and madness,” determined to outdo itself by sending someone to emulate the feat of Hercules and Ulysses in visiting the “shades below.” The logical person to send was Talleyrand, “the apostate,” since he had the best chance of returning: “If the devil had a friend on earth whom it was his interest to keep there, it was generally believed that he was the man; there was consequently little danger of his detention in the dominions of his infernal majesty.” Thus Talleyrand, with the help of a German magician, visits the lower regions. Here he suffers various indignities at the hands of the three-headed Cerberus, the canine guard at the gates of Hell, observes the horrible torment of the revolutionaries—Robespierre, Danton, Carnot, Marat, Condorcet, and the like—and finally sees King Louis XVI and his “gentle, faithful Queen,” living in the perpetual ecstasy of Elysium. Talleyrand is told by his escort, Dulau, “the unfortunate archbishop of Arles,” that France is doomed,

that the monarchy will be restored, and that Britain will be triumphant. Alarmed, Talleyrand asks whether there is not some hope of French gain in America, and is told that Columbia will be "an easy, willing prize." Leaving Talleyrand to find his own way back to mortal men, the writer closes with a prophetic warning to Americans who are blind to the dangers of French chicanery.

Although uneven and showing signs of hasty composition, "Talleyrand's Descent" is one of the most effective examples of its genre, and has some interest even for modern readers. The very idea of the shrewd, urbane Talleyrand wandering about the nether regions, conversing with Cerberus, must have touched the risibilities of eighteenth-century readers. The extended dialogue between Talleyrand and the three-headed Cerberus, who alternates between the human and the canine, is filled with sly plays on words, sardonic humor, and slapstick comedy. The scene between these two comes to a violent climax when Cerberus crushes Talleyrand into insensibility with a fraternal hug and then fills his three mouths with water which he empties into his victim's face to revive him. Probably few readers—even among the arch-Federalists—could bring themselves to accept Cliffton's description of the beheaded Louis XVI as "mild and good," his head bathed in "celestial glories," but even the most rabid French enthusiast must have chuckled at the misadventures of the hapless Talleyrand in the infernal regions.

The publication of the last installment of this satire on March 16, 1799, marks the end of the identifiable journalism of the Anchor Club. However, its members apparently continued to fight for the Federalist cause for some time longer. As late as November 13, 1799, the Aurora was still moved to threaten people with the publication of their names if they encouraged "the distracted members of the Anchor Club—or the Gong Club, to persevere." The demise of the Anchor Club, according to Fenno, came about because "the government which they [the members] defended proved recreant, and deserted its own cause by making peace with the enemy. The object of the Club was no longer attainable; and the labours of its members ceased."16

The cause of the Anchor Club was, of course, a lost one. Long before its inception there were unmistakable signs of the rising power

16 Poems, Chiefly Occasional . . ., xvii.
of the Republicans and of the decline of the Federalists. Moreover, the principles and actions it advocated—its zealous devotion to Britain, its harsh treatment of President Adams, its rash clamor for war with France—were unacceptable even to most Federalists. Achievement of its objectives was thus foredoomed to failure. Yet the crusade of the Anchor Club doubtless served to disturb the peace of mind of many of the "democratic tribe." The Aurora, for example, tried to brush it aside with a blustering charge of alliance with Britain:

The remnant of the self created societies, in the case of the Anchor Club, would be a very serious topic of alarm, if it were an American republican association. But as a majority of its members are foreign, or in foreign employment and connexion, as they are in the British line, the matter is all right enough. They are perfectly impartial, for they have attacked the President, the Vice-President, and the French minister Talleyrand, whenever the British interests have been unfavorably affected by the conduct of either. The British have found, that chivalry is nothing to the press in this country. The press they find is "the cheap defence of Nations."

What annoyance the Aurora and its anti-Federalist friends had experienced was soon to be relieved. The election of Jefferson marked the final victory of the detested democratic faction and the triumph of all that was anathema to the extreme Federalists. And the peaceful "Revolution of 1800" proved false the prophets of the Anchor Club, who had predicted catastrophe for America in the event of a Republican ascension to power. Thus the voice of the Anchor Club was permanently silenced.

Although the Anchor Club had no real or permanent impact upon American politics, it is nevertheless an interesting phenomenon to the student of American history. The political journalism which it fostered serves as an illuminating footnote to the political and diplomatic history of this critical period.

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