

Sydney George Fisher, Son of the Diarist

EARLY in the morning a bright, sturdy, eight-year-old boy knocked on his father's door and called "Lincoln is shot." Terribly upset, the older man verified this "calamitous news."¹ The father was Sidney George Fisher and the son, who preferred a variant spelling of his first name, Sydney George.

The boy was an only child. His parents, devoted to each other, were likewise deeply attached to him and he to them. Although destined to be orphaned at fifteen, his early years at home, strongly influenced as they were by his highly individualistic father, were to affect his whole life.

Young Sydney's father, a Philadelphian of Philadelphians, a graduate of Dickinson College, and a member of the bar, was an informed and scholarly observer of contemporary events, as his many well-considered newspaper articles attest. The Fisher family had been prominent in the city for generations and Sidney George Fisher and his two brothers had inherited modest fortunes from their parents, both of whom died at an early age. Through his mother, Sidney became the owner of Mount Harmon, an ancestral property in Maryland which was to play so important a part in his life. Quite early he gave up the practice of law, for, unlike his successful brother Henry, he considered that business, even a profession, was beneath the dignity of a gentleman.²

He visualized himself as a scholar-farmer, but unfortunately Mount Harmon, to which he clung tenaciously, proved to be a constant drain on his slender resources, failing utterly to live up to

¹ Nicholas B. Wainwright, *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years 1834-1871* (Philadelphia, 1967), 492. Hereinafter cited as *Fisher Diary*. Parts from the original diary not included in the published version are cited as *Fisher Diary Manuscript*.

² Nicholas B. Wainwright, "Sidney George Fisher—The Personality of a Diarist," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, LXXII, Part I (1962), 15-30.

his optimistic expectations. The story of Mount Harmon and the events of his life is recorded at great length in the magnificent diary he kept from 1834 until his death.³

In 1851 he married Elizabeth Ingersoll, daughter of a prominent family and mother of his son, who was born September 11, 1856, at 11 Sansom Street, Philadelphia. A few weeks later, the child was baptized at Christ Church,⁴ and the year following his family moved to Forest Hill, a twenty-acre property north of the city proper.⁵ This was to be young Sydney's home until his father's death in July, 1871.

As the years at Forest Hill wore on, his father's finances deteriorated steadily until he was reduced to living on the charity of his relatives.⁶ Broken in health and fortune, he had long since retired to a life of reading, writing, and contemplation, and of guiding the interests of his son. He taught the boy to love nature in all its manifestations, to ride and shoot, and he gave him pets—dogs, goats, pigeons, and chickens. On Sunday young Sydney went to church with his mother but without his father, who, nevertheless, was by no means irreligious.⁷ Among the father's ideas absorbed by the son were an admiration for the founding stock of the United States, an Anglo-philism, a love of the Union, and an attachment to Mount Harmon, which the boy was to inherit.

The shock to Sydney of the death of his father, followed in ten months by that of his mother in May, 1872, must have been extreme. Aged fifteen, he was old enough to have become closely integrated into the somewhat isolated life of his parents and yet was too young to face life alone.

In the September following his mother's death Sydney was sent to St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire, entering the fourth form. At the end of the school year he was promoted, but the next year repeated the fifth form so that he did not graduate until 1876, when he was nineteen. He did well in his studies in his final two years at boarding school, served as editor of the school paper, as president of the Missionary Society, and developed his inherent

³ The diary is in the collection of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴ *Fisher Diary*, 260, 263.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁶ Wainwright, "Sidney George Fisher—The Personality of a Diarist," 20, 21.

⁷ *Fisher Diary Manuscript*, Jan. 21, 1866, and elsewhere.

literary ability.⁸ When the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* printed something believed detrimental to the School, it was Fisher who was mainly instrumental in composing a reply, for which he and his fellow students were praised by the rector, the Rev. Henry A. Coit.⁹

An interesting question is posed as to why this bright boy took an extra year to graduate. He had attended schools in Germantown and in the fall of 1870 had entered Reginald H. Chase's "collegiate school" at Broad and Chestnut in Philadelphia.¹⁰ Indeed, his progress had been such that in 1869 one of his teachers had assured his father that he would be ready for college in three years.¹¹ Of course, it is possible that he did not attend school during the years in which his parents died. Also, it is probable that the adjustment to boarding school for this sensitive and bereaved youngster required time. At all events, he matriculated at Trinity in 1876, entering the sophomore class.

At college Fisher matured rapidly, revealing many of his basic characteristics and standing out among his classmates. He frequently joined in political debates; as one of the graduating class orators he chose the subject "Defense of the Declaration of Independence." In his sophomore year he won honors in English, and as a senior was one of the top three receiving honors at graduation in addition to special honors in ethics, metaphysics, and English.¹² However, he did not fulfill the student paper prediction that he would receive a Phi Beta Kappa key, the reason for this failure possibly lying in his involvement in a student protest.

The undergraduates customarily celebrated Washington's Birthday with improvised songs. For some reason in Fisher's last year the faculty demanded that the songs "should be first submitted to the Professor of English Literature." The students claimed this to be contrary to tradition and a violation of their rights, and at a mass meeting presided over by Fisher, then president of the senior class, they determined to hold the celebration in town and sing what they pleased. Their songs and proceedings on this occasion were innocu-

⁸ Records of Alumni Association of St. Paul's School.

⁹ A. S. Pier, *St. Paul's School* (New York, 1934), 170-173.

¹⁰ Fisher Diary Manuscript, Sept. 15, 1870.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Sept. 16, 1869.

¹² Trinity College catalogues, 1876-1879.

ous, but the faculty and administration were vexed and suspended Fisher and five others. The student body retaliated by absenting themselves "from all chapels, recitations and college exercises."¹³

Parents, when notified of this doleful situation, flocked to Hartford together with other interested parties. Meetings were held with the conflicting groups and a compromise was reached. The undergraduates acknowledged that their actions constituted "a disregard of their obligations"; the faculty, on its part, voided all punishment—the *status quo ante bellum* as the school paper remarked.¹⁴ All through life, Fisher was to exhibit the combative trait he displayed in this episode.

While first base on the senior intramural team seems to have been his only active role, he was always interested in athletics, acting continuously during his college years as an officer of various athletic bodies such as the baseball association and the boat club.¹⁵ Graduation did not diminish his attachment to the College. No other connection he was to make would be as close to him. Proposed for Alumni Trustee in 1888 and following years, he was elected in 1895 and remained a Trustee until his death.¹⁶ Considering his residence in Philadelphia, his attendance at meetings was excellent. Time and again he was chosen Secretary *pro tem* of the board, and he became an enthusiastic and diligent member of its various committees, the Library Committee in particular.¹⁷ The faculty found in him not only an interest superior to that of the average Trustee, but a personality friendly and attentive to their opinions.¹⁸ His own opinions carried weight. For example, in 1923 he successfully opposed President Remsen Brinckerhoff Ogilby in the latter's desire to donate a part of Trinity's campus as a site for a church not connected with the College.¹⁹ Fisher asserted that there was no legal right to give the land away, and declared the implication that the land "might as well be used for something other than education is very discouraging."²⁰

¹³ *The Trinity Tablet*, XII, No. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *The Trinity Ioy*, 1878-1879.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Trustees of Trinity College, June 27, 1888; June 25, 1890; June 24, 1891; June 22, 1892; June 27, 1894; June 25, 1895.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, June 25, 1895, to Dec. 4, 1926.

¹⁸ Personal interviews of the author with faculty members.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Trustees of Trinity College, 1923.

²⁰ Fisher to Ogilby, Apr. 30, 1923. Trinity College Archives, hereinafter cited as TCA.

Many letters written in his last years were full of fire. Commenting on college committees he wrote "Heretofore our committees have always had the President for Chairman, which kills all initiative. . . ." ²¹ To President Ogilby he complained of the bell in the college chapel as "much less pleasing in tone than a cow bell." ²²

That he had a deep concern for education is attested by his writings on the subject. The *Churchman* in 1884 published a long article, later issued as a pamphlet entitled *Church Colleges*, in which Fisher pointed out their importance in the colonial period, particularly those connected with the Anglican Church. William and Mary, King's College, and the College of Philadelphia were cited for their contributions, and he stressed the fact that "two-thirds of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were of the [Anglican] faith." ²³ That the importance of the church college had declined Fisher conceded, but he hoped that the Episcopal Church would take a greater interest in the small church college which he felt was an important facet of American education. Indirect praise was given Trinity when he wrote of Hartford: "Few places could be found better suited to student life." ²⁴

Much later, in 1917, the Library of American Educational Methods published *American Education*, a book in which Fisher criticized much of the contemporary educational method, particularly of children. The "failure of parents and early teachers to develop mental and moral fibre from the beginning" ²⁵ and the continual shifting of methods handicapped children for higher education. On the whole, he believed European children to be better prepared while America struggled with the difficult problem of trying to educate vast numbers. Our colleges he wrote were the "best hope of democracy," but our college faculties were underpaid and underprivileged—they should not be treated "like mill hands," after all "teaching is an art, not a mechanical routine." ²⁶

Fisher was a man of many interests. Aside from education he devoted himself to political and historical studies, to his love of

²¹ Mimeographed statement to Trustees, Nov. 27, 1925, TCA.

²² Fisher to Ogilby, Dec. 2, 1926, TCA.

²³ *Church Colleges* (Philadelphia, 1895), 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁵ *American Education* (Boston, 1917), 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 148, 167.

nature, and to a brief legal career. Since his father had been a lawyer it was natural that Sydney should study law. He entered Harvard Law School in the fall of 1880, leaving in 1882 without graduating.²⁷ After studying for the bar examination, he was admitted on February 3, 1883, to the Philadelphia Bar,²⁸ maintaining offices successively at 402 Walnut Street, 706 Walnut Street, and elsewhere.

In 1887, he became a member of the Philadelphia Bar Association and commencing in 1890 served on its library committee for a three-year term. As might be expected, he was an active committeeman, proposing important motions and acting on occasion as secretary *pro tem*.²⁹ Although listed until his death in the *Directory of Members of the Philadelphia Bar*, there is little evidence of his practice; it seems evident he early abandoned the active pursuit of this profession. However, his scholarly interest in the law remained. Up to 1891 he wrote numerous articles which appeared in leading legal periodicals: three in the *American Law Review*; two in the *American Law Register*; and one in the *London Law Quarterly Review*.³⁰

During the period in which he was writing on law he also wrote articles on government, some of which were published in the *Political Science Quarterly* and others in *Popular Science Monthly*.³¹ Ever ready to express his views in writing, he took pride in a letter he wrote the *New York Nation* in 1880. This letter he believed was important in "the movement which established the various civil service reform societies throughout the country."³²

The flood of new immigration, which began in the late nineteenth century and which excited public opinion, worried Fisher greatly. In the *Forum* in 1893 and 1894 appeared two articles in which he noted the changes that had occurred after 1830 with the advent of large

²⁷ *Harvard University Directory*, 1913.

²⁸ John Hill Martin, *Martin's Bench and Bar of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1883), 268.

²⁹ Records of the Philadelphia Bar Association.

³⁰ "Survival of Actions," "Limited Partnerships," and "Are the Departments of Government Independent," *American Law Review*, XX, 48, 848, and XXI, 210; "The Teaching of Law by the Case System" and "The Railroad Leases to Control the Anthracite Coal Trade," *American Law Register*, XXVII, 416, and XXXI, 289; "Administration of Equity Through Common Law Forms," *Law Quarterly Review*, I, 455.

³¹ "The Suspension of Habeas Corpus in the War of the Rebellion," *Political Science Quarterly*, III, 454.

³² *Who's Who in America*, 1899-1900.

scale immigration. He pointed out that the Founding Fathers, including Jefferson, had been dubious about the advantages of heavy immigration, and in both articles stressed the importance of unity in the development of a meaningful civilization. Again and again, the Jews and the Greeks were cited as highly homogeneous groups who represented "the two nations of antiquity to which we owe most."³³ Fisher held that great cultures were produced by nations united by a common ancestry.

Commenting on the Flowering of New England, he showed that the blooming had occurred at a time and in an area which had had no substantial immigration since 1640. "It is not contended that unity and homogeneousness alone will produce a literature"; it comprised "only one of the essential elements."³⁴

Fisher believed that large-scale immigration marked the advent of corruption of the electorate and the degradation of politics in the United States. If, however, "the almighty dollar and the almighty greed for it" were the main consideration, a mixed population was no handicap.³⁵ He maintained that a large influx was not necessary to increase the population since "our population doubled itself by births alone every twenty-three years" in the early days of the Republic without the aid of immigrants.³⁶

In regard to a movement to limit immigration, Fisher trusted it would avoid the absurdity of the Know Nothings and "be entirely free from attacks on the Roman Catholics."³⁷ These articles, and a similar one in *Popular Science Monthly*, were early manifestations of the movement against unrestricted immigration, and were believed to have helped the formation of the Immigration Restriction League.³⁸

From political science, Fisher moved toward a sister field—history and biography. In 1897 appeared his book *The Evolution of the Constitution of the United States*, which was both political science and

³³ "Has Immigration Dried Up Our Literature?," *Forum*, XVI, 562.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 566.

³⁵ "Alien Degradation of American Character," *ibid.*, XIV, 613ff.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 609.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 614-615.

³⁸ "Has Immigration Increased Population?" and "Immigration and Crime," *Popular Science Monthly*, XLVIII, 244, and XLIX, 625.

history. This work was well received and ran through three editions. Of it the *American Historical Review* commented, "It collates for the first time . . . provisions of colonial charters and early state constitutions."³⁹

By his late thirties, Fisher had fixed on his course of life. Although he described himself as lawyer-author, and a contemporary referred to him as an author-historian, while a Harvard directory listed him as an educator, he had in fact become generally recognized as an historian. He centered his interests on the American colonial period and the Revolution, specializing in the history of Pennsylvania and the Middle Atlantic States.

Three of his books deal with the latter subject: *The Making of Pennsylvania* (1896); *Pennsylvania Colony and Commonwealth* (1897); and *The Quaker Colonies: A Chronicle of the Proprietors of the Delaware* (1919). The first two, published by J. B. Lippincott & Company, were both praised and attacked, and they remain among the most readable books on Pennsylvania history. Fisher's language tended to be violent. He may well have overstressed the Quaker role and been too hard on the later Penns, but nevertheless he wrote a fine account of early Pennsylvania. His 1919 study of *The Quaker Colonies* was issued by Yale as part of the *Chronicles of America Series*. A small book, as were most in this series, and obviously much compressed, it was described by Evarts B. Greene, a distinguished historian of the colonial period, as "written with evident zest, and the historical pilgrim to that region should find the book an excellent companion."⁴⁰

The True History of the American Revolution in 1902 and *The Struggle for American Independence* in 1908, both published by Lippincott, represented Fisher's most widely regarded contribution to American historiography, the latter work, his longest book, being a much enlarged, revised, and improved version of the first. He was one of the earliest popular historians who pointed out that the Revolution was in many ways a civil war and that the Tories and the English authorities had a reasonable cause, even though it was ineptly handled, militarily and politically. His vehement expression along these lines annoyed some reviewers. Later, in an article in the

³⁹ *American Historical Review*, III (1898), 153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, XXV (1920), 295.

*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*⁴¹ and in a lecture before the American Philosophical Society, Fisher made use of material from these books.⁴²

Men, Women and Manners in Colonial Times appeared in 1897 in two volumes, ran through three editions, and constituted his second longest work. In it he grouped colonies geographically. The most rewarding part, since it dealt with a section often slighted, described life in the Carolinas. Although Fisher deplored the "crime of slavery," he pictured the charm and cultivation of South Carolina and the attractiveness of the land which he knew well and evidently enjoyed. In typical fashion, when describing New England, he characterized Cotton Mather's writing as "written with all the fulsome-ness, unction and cant of his faith."⁴³ Praise, however, was given to Connecticut: "There is no State in the Union which has been so well represented outside of itself."⁴⁴ His description of life in the Middle Colonies did not come up to the standard of his other writings on that section.

Fisher was the author of three biographies: *The True Benjamin Franklin* (1899); *The True William Penn* (1900); and *The True Daniel Webster* (1911), all published by Lippincott as part of its extensive series of "True" biographies and histories. Fisher is not to be blamed for titles which sound banal and which he evidently did not like.⁴⁵

All three biographies are easy to read. His Franklin is the most outdated as so much work has since been done on this intriguing man. The book on Penn was reprinted in 1932 and has stood up well, while the biography of Webster is probably the best one-volume study which treats Webster's life as a whole. Fisher's biographies were well received and were reprinted in many editions. Together with his other writings, they gained him widespread recognition in the world of scholarship, and honorary degrees from the

41 "The Twenty-Eight Charges Against the King in the Declaration of Independence," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXI (1907), 257-303.

42 "The Legendary and Myth-Making Process in Histories of the American Revolution," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, LI, No. 204 (1912), 53-75.

43 *Men, Women and Manners in Colonial Times* (Philadelphia, 1900), 167.

44 *Ibid.*, 262.

45 *Trinity College Bulletin*, III (1902), 44.

Western University of Pennsylvania (University of Pittsburgh), from Trinity, and from the University of Pennsylvania. As a speaker before learned societies and educational institutions, he was much in demand.

Of medium height, slight build, with mustache and trimmed beard, a wearer of pince-nez glasses, he had the look of an intellectual. Generally dressed in tweeds, he appeared to his contemporaries, as he no doubt wished, a scholarly country gentleman. One of the most important facets of Fisher's character was his lifelong enthusiasm for nature and the outdoors. He wrote numerous articles for *Forest and Stream* and similar publications on shooting, natural history, and related subjects.⁴⁶ Fisher traveled extensively in the tidewater South and along the Gulf Coast, often with his cousin William M. Meigs. Many winters found him in a houseboat on Florida's Kissimmee River.⁴⁷ Later, he spent considerable time at the Broadwater Club, near Nassawadox on Virginia's Eastern Shore.⁴⁸ Articles such as "The Glories of the Single-Hand Canoe," "The Passing of the Florida Catch Dog," and "Two Weeks with the Louisiana French" bear witness to his particular interests in the South.

Allied to his outdoor interests was Fisher's close association with and affection for the Corinthian Yacht Club of Philadelphia. This club, founded in 1892 on the Delaware at Essington, became the leading organization of its kind on the river. Fisher was elected a member in 1895 and became active in its affairs, serving on its board of trustees and on the house committee.⁴⁹ At one time he availed himself of an unused trap shooting lodge on the Club property as a place where "he could write in peace."⁵⁰ In fact, after 1908 he lived much of the time at the Club, and it was there that he died on February 22, 1927. A favored young cousin, R. Sturgis Ingersoll, summoned at the last moment, arrived when Fisher was already in a coma and found him alone with the Club servants.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Fisher also had articles published in *The American Field* and *The London Field*.

⁴⁷ *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1937), VI, 411-412.

⁴⁸ Letters from Broadwater Club, TCA.

⁴⁹ Robert Barrie, *Early Days of the Corinthian Yacht Club of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1940).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵¹ Interview with R. Sturgis Ingersoll.

Even longer in point of time than Fisher's association with the Corinthian Yacht Club was his connection with the University Club of Philadelphia. This club was founded in 1881, a year before his election to it. In its early days he served as a governor and also as a member of the house committee,⁵² and he remained a member all his life; indeed, the University Club was listed in the *Social Register* as his address from 1912 on, and he actually did reside there from time to time. Other clubs to which he belonged for relatively short periods of time included the Germantown, Philadelphia, and Merion cricket clubs.⁵³

Fisher's career reflected strongly his father's influence and the statement in his father's diary that "early impressions are too powerful to be removed by the influences of after life."⁵⁴ In his college record and later accomplishments Fisher demonstrated the ability to succeed at the law or at several other prosperous lines of activity. But his father could not "bear to think that he will ever engage in business or even a profession. The snares, temptations and perils of either are dreadful to imagine when the character of a child is at stake. All money making pursuits, even the *learned* professions as they are called, *bread studies* as Carlyle calls them, are moreover narrowing to the mind. . . . I would make him a farmer . . . an educated one, with the tools and accomplishments of a gentleman."⁵⁵ His wish was to be largely fulfilled, except that his son did not become a farmer, an endeavor in which he himself had been such an abysmal failure, but the father's love for Mount Harmon was respected.

Even in personal matters his father's influence persisted; or was it the diary? He must often have read it during his quiet, lonely life. In its pages he found confirmed how much his parents loved him and how much he became the center of their world. Also, it pointed out all too clearly how much both had suffered because of their straitened circumstances. Their troubles may well have made him hesitate

⁵² Year books of the University Club, 1883-1924.

⁵³ *Social Register, Philadelphia*, 1891-1927. Addresses listed for Fisher in the Philadelphia directories are 402 Walnut St. (1881-1887, 1890-1891), 706 Walnut St. (1888-1889), Brown Building (1893), then 328 Chestnut Street for fifteen years, next the Philadelphia Bourse Building, and finally the Drexel Building.

⁵⁴ Wainwright, "Sidney George Fisher—The Personality of a Diarist," 16.

⁵⁵ Fisher Diary Manuscript, June 11, 1860.

at the perils of possibly dragging a wife through the trials which had beset his mother, and thus resulted in his bachelorhood. To be sure, he was not improvident as his father had been; on his death he left an estate in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand dollars.

Toward the end of his life during the long winter evenings at Essington when the club was empty he could well have considered that he had kept faith with his father's code. He had held on to Mount Harmon, he had kept clear of the world of business and had pursued the life of a scholar, he had defended the ideas of his father, he had recounted the achievements of the colonial stock, he had communed with nature, and he had remained a Philadelphia gentleman. His will bore final testimony to his two main interests, nature and books, for he divided his estate between the National Audubon Society of New York and the Library Company of Philadelphia, of which he had been a director for many years.

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