

New College's Shakespeare Club

Among the few records of Victorian and Edwardian clubs and societies now in the college archives are two volumes with the initials 'N.C.S.C.' in pseudo-gothic lettering on their covers, recording the activities of the college's 'Shakespeare [*sic*] Club'. One is a photograph album covering the years 1867-1906, and the other is a battered notebook of play-readings covering the years 1904-1908 (NC Archives, JCR/Q6/1, 2). Together they provide an often amusing glimpse of the workings of an occasionally boisterous, occasionally apathetic, college club. It is not known exactly when it was founded, and it seems to have gone into abeyance in late 1908. Membership seems to have fluctuated between twelve and twenty members in any given year, mostly comprising classicists, lawyers and historians, plus the occasional scientist.

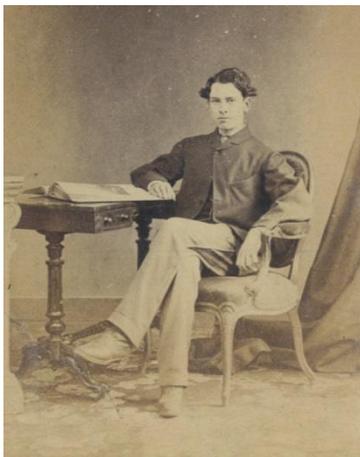
The main purpose of NCSC seems to have been to gather once a week in Michaelmas and Hilary terms to read a Shakespeare play, the parts for which had been distributed and studied beforehand. That at least was the theory, although it rapidly becomes apparent from the play-reading book that some emergency casting took place on the night, after the relevant club member failed to turn up, with occasionally unfortunate consequences. The same book also makes it clear that it was not unusual for the President of the Club to take the leading role in each week's play, and thus was no doubt the person who had chosen the repertoire for the year. There is no indication that the plays were ever performed in public, although the references to the University Dramatic Society and to plays acted by college members during Rag Week suggests that several of its members did more than simply read scripts.

The Club certainly contained some impressive members. Perhaps the most prestigious (in acting terms) was Henry Brodribb Irving, son of the great actor Henry Irving and by all accounts a chip off the old block. Even before arriving at New College in 1888, and while still at Marlborough College, the thirteen-year old HBI and his brother had (as *The Illustrated Graphic*, 29 September 1891 expressed it) 'played in the screen-scene of "The School for Scandal"... at a bazaar in the Duke of Wellington's Riding School'. He came to Oxford to read Law and Modern History, but within his time here also performed in several OUDS productions as well as being elected, in his final year, as President of NCSC. Even after gaining his degree, he dithered whether to follow a career in the law or in the theatre, and ended up doing both with some success for many years. Equally prestigious in his own way was HBI's contemporary Oliver Villiers, Lord Ampthill: the son of the British Ambassador to Berlin, he was born in Rome and educated at Eton before coming to New College in 1888 to read Modern History and become entangled with NCSC. Perhaps it stood him in good stead for his future career as Private Secretary to Joseph Chamberlain and Governor of Madras.



*NCSC in 1890: Lord Amphill (President) is seated in the centre, with Henry B. Irving on his right. Nobody else in the photograph was thought worthy of identification!
(JCR/Q6/2, fol. 18)*

A string of Presidents of NCSC in the 1860s and 1870s had included the Wykehamists Frederick Teesdale (1867), John Moberley, son of the future Bishop of Salisbury, (1868), and Walter Humphreys (1869) whose subsequent career as a master at Oswestry Grammar School may well have inspired future New College and NCSC members Richard Gilbertson and William Archibald Spooner.



Arthur O. Prickard, President of NCSC ca. 1863 (JCR/6/2 fol. 4)

Other members included the future New College fellows Arthur Prickard and Edmund Morshead, while Walter Guillemard cemented a different sort of link when his sister Edith married Frederick Teesdale in 1870. In 1893 the President of NCSC was Nowell Charles Smith, descendant and biographer of the raconteur, writer and New College fellow Sydney Smith; Nowell's double First in Literae Humaniores won him a fellowship at Magdalen, but three years later he was back at New College with a fellowship here, revived his membership of NCSC and remained an active participant until 1904.



*Some of the NCSC members under Gavin Simonds's presidency in 1903
(JCR/Q6/2, fol. 32)*

*Back row L to R: Henry H. Hardy, Frederick M. Hicks, Arthur M. Asquith;
Front row L to R: Gavin T. Simonds (President); Nowell C. Smith, Arthur Moon (dubbed 'the
Presidential Pretender' the following year).*

Fig. 1: NCSC play readings 1904-1908 (1 vol.)

| Play title: Shakespeare | Readings |
|---|--|
| Julius Caesar | Feb. 1904, Feb. 1905, Mar. 1906, Feb. 1907 |
| As You Like It | Feb. 1904, Feb. 1905 |
| Twelfth Night | Feb. 1904, Oct. 1906, Oct. 1907, Oct. 1908 |
| Henry V | Feb. 1904, Feb. 1906, Nov. 1907 |
| Cymbeline | Feb. 1904 |
| The Tempest | Mar. 1904, Nov. 1905 |
| Henry IV Part II | Oct. 1904, Feb. 1907 |
| Macbeth | Oct. 1904, Oct. 1905, Oct. 1907 |
| A Midsummer Night's Dream | Oct. 1904, Nov. 1906, Feb. 1908 |
| King John | Nov. 1904, Oct. 1905, Feb. 1908 |
| Much Ado about Nothing | Nov. 1904, Nov. 1905 |
| King Lear | Nov. 1904, Oct. 1906 |
| Measure for Measure | Nov. 1904, Feb. 1906 |
| Romeo & Juliet | Dec. 1904 |
| Two Gentlemen of Verona | Jan. 1905, Mar. 1907 |
| Richard II | Feb. 1905, Nov. 1906 |
| All's Well that Ends Well | Feb 1905, Feb. 1906 |
| A Winter's Tale | Feb. 1905, Jan. 1907 |
| Taming of the Shrew | Nov. 1906 |
| Henry IV Part I | Feb. 1907 |
| Othello | Feb. 1907 |
| Merry Wives of Windsor | Mar. 1907 |
| King Henry VIII | Nov. 1907 |
| | |
| Play title: Other | Readings |
| Lady Windermere's Fan (Wilde, 1891) | Mar. 1905 |
| The Importance of Being Earnest (Wilde, 1895) | Mar. 1906, Nov. 1908 |
| You Never Can Tell (Shaw, 1896) | Nov. 1906 |
| The Gay Lord Quex (Pinero, 1899) | Dec. 1906 |
| The Cabinet Minister (Pinero, 1890) | Feb. 1908 |
| Arms and the Man (Shaw, 1894) | Feb. 1908 |

A sense of what the play readings were like comes across vividly from the play-reading book. These were student activities and the choice of plays was fairly predictable; recurring favourites were *Julius Caesar* and *Twelfth Night*, both of which were read in four out of the five years covered by the notebook. *Julius Caesar* was constantly popular for its noisy closing scene and stirring speeches; as President Roderick Oliver remarked, 'the crowd in the Forum scene thoroughly entered into the spirit of their position' (1 February 1904), although in that instance there was the additional incentive that Nowell Smith, who had just become Dean, stepped in at short notice to read the part of Brutus. *Twelfth Night* got off to a fine start the same year with 'a successful and well-sustained reading', even if 'we have never before heard "Come away, Death" to the tune of Hymn no. 241 Ancient & Modern' or 'the Club

proved fully equal to singing a catch, but it is doubtful if “Three blind mice” is as early as Shakespeare’ (15 February 1904).

There were however some outstanding readings over the years: regrettably no record remains of Henry Irving’s performances, but once the play-reading book commences it records special mentions of Gavin Simonds as Henry V (29 February 1904), Arthur Asquith as Falstaff (in what must have been an unrecorded reading late in 1903, commented upon in President Oliver’s summary of the ‘season’, 14 March 1904), Roderick Oliver himself as Mistress Quickly and Shallow later that year (17 October 1904), the scheming Arthur Moon as the Second Witch in *Macbeth* (24 October 1904), and Nowell Smith as Lear (21 November 1904).

Other plays fared less well and were not repeated: *Romeo and Juliet* caused difficulties for an all-male cast, both *Othello* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* suffered from weak principals, and *King Henry VIII* was undermined both by ‘several long speeches that should be cut’ and by Tom Fitzherbert-Brockholes’s ‘persistent giggling’ as Cromwell (6 Nov. 1907). If looming exams played havoc with reading *The Tempest*, so too did interval refreshments and bad casting: witness the exasperated comment after a reading of *Cymbeline* that ‘The first part of the play was well read, but after the crumpets some members seemed unable to take the play seriously at all’ (22 February 1904). Things got worse for *Henry IV Part I* in 1907: it was only tried at all because *Henry IV Part II* had gone reasonably well the previous year, but Henry Prince of Wales (Cecil Charrington) went down with influenza, Falstaff (John Shephard) ran out of steam before the end of the play, new member Edward Hain found himself reading both parts in the altercation dialogue between Mistress Quickly and Bardolph, and a sprint for the bar was predictable after ‘Anchovy toast was added to the orthodox muffins & was variously criticised. It certainly creates a thirst’ (4 February 1907).

It seems that the heyday of NCSC ended in 1904, and later entries in the play-reading book indicate that several Presidents, despairing of finding good enough Shakespearian readers or plays with a small enough number of roles, resorted to ‘rag plays’: modern comedies which had been performed in Oxford during rag weeks and had bailed out the NCSC now and again since 1905. Thus the rather surprising entries, in a Shakespeare play-reading book, of two works by Arthur Pinero, two by Oscar Wilde, and two by George Bernard Shaw. But by late 1908 even these were of no avail and the book ends with the sad note that ‘Owing to the unwillingness of members to read Shakespeare, it was decided to read, at this meeting, a rag play by Oscar Wilde [*The Importance of Being Earnest*]. Although, as usual someone failed to turn up...’ (2 November 1908). The remaining pages of both the play-reading book and the photo album are blank.

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