William Archibald Spooner and his Spoonerisms

Spooner's Portrait, which hangs in Hall

A useful kind of drudge, but not a ruler of men…

Shortly after arriving at New College, I was asked to put together a small display on one W. A. Spooner, a famous alumnus of New College. I am a little embarrassed to say that I was unfamiliar with him, and had never heard of a Spoonerism. As I looked into Spooner's life, I gradually put together a picture of a very colourful character who, despite his many problems, was one of Oxford's best loved figures. As College's first non-Wykehamist fellow, he came to an institution that had become small and inward looking, but by the time he retired, it had undoubtedly become one of Oxford's leading colleges. It is regrettable that a man, who during his life was highly regarded by his peers, is now best remembered for a quirk of his nature.

The most feared man in New College, the man everyone scuttled from . . .

William Archibald Spooner was born on 22 July 1844 to William and Jane Lydia Spooner. His father was a county court judge and a man that Spooner described in his diary as having a 'character . . . spoilt by a certain self-indulgence'.[1] His father had a reputation for liking the finer things; this with rumours of unpaid bills could explain why the young Spooner attended a Grammar school and not one of the prestigious public schools of the time. Of his mother he wrote, 'She is subject to great fits of nervousness and depression . . . she has been trained up to live life much by rule and lives it so'.[2]

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[1] William Hayter, *Spooner: A Biography* (London, 1977), p. 20.

[2] ibid., p. 21.

Leaving this happy household, Spooner went to Oswestry on the Welsh border for his education. There, he found himself mixing with students from different social backgrounds. He remarked that in Grammar schools 'boys of different ranks mixed freely together; they came to know, to understand, and, where respect was possible to respect one another'.[3] Not much more is written about his childhood. He only began keeping a diary at the age of thirty-seven, and his autobiography touches only briefly on the topic. We do catch a glimpse of Spooner's first introduction to New College. Oswestry's Headmaster for a time was a Rev. W. F. Short. Spooner described him as 'a man of great energy' but lacking as an educator. He was however a fellow of New College, and in Spooner's own words, 'it was to this fact that I owe my introduction to New College'.[4]

Corpus Christi was Spooner's first choice. Failing that, he applied and was accepted into New College in 1862. As an undergraduate he was deeply involved in sports, being an avid rower and taking part in the College Torpids. He received a First in Classical Honour Moderations in 1864, and a First in Classics in 1866. Following this, Spooner was elected a Fellow of College. He spent the next year teaching private students, and was appointed first as a Lecturer, and finally as a Tutor in College. In Spooner's characteristically vague style, he describes that he 'continued to serve the College for more than thirty years in these capacities, and for part of the time in that of Dean also'.[5]

Despite being described by an American student as 'the most feared man in New College', many stories of Spooner's kindness exist. One touching story describes how Spooner insisted on providing an Egyptian student with extra blankets and warm clothes, as the boy was struggling with the British climate.[6] Another tells of a student who had injured himself while playing hockey. Spooner paid for his medical expenses, as his family could not afford them.[7] Spooner's odd behaviour could be off-putting at times, but he had his students' best interests at heart.

Due to College reforms in 1877, celibacy was no longer a requirement for Fellows. Spooner took advantage of this, marrying Frances Wycliffe the following year. Affectionately calling her *Frank*, he described her in his diary as 'delicate . . . very placid, sometimes impassive, but [she] has a sweet good nature' and possessing a 'beautiful face and a singularly sweet smile which lights it all up'.[8] Contemporary accounts are not as kind however. They describe her as an imposing figure, discretely referred to as 'The Madonna'.[9] There is a wonderful anecdote from Julian Huxley, a Fellow of College, who described after hearing Spooner utter a Spoonerism, 'Mrs Spooner, a large and majestic woman, fixed me with a stony look: I didn't even smile'.[10]

The College Warden, James Sewell's health was in decline by 1902, and attending to his duties was increasingly difficult. He passed away in January of the following year, and Spooner was nominated to replace him. Standing unopposed, he was unanimously voted into the office of Warden by the College Fellows. Due to his increased workload, he gave up tutoring to focus on his new duties. That is not to say he was focused entirely on work. The Spooners were great entertainers, hosting many dinners in the newly renovated Warden's lodgings with such famous guests as Marconi and Elgar among others.

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[3] ibid., p. 22.
[4] ibid., p. 23.
[5] ibid., p. 258.
[6] ibid., p. 130.
[7] ibid., p. 130.
[8] ibid., p. 66.
[9] John Buxton and Penry Williams, eds., *New College Oxford 1379-1979* (Oxford, 1979), p. 87.
[10] Hayter, *Spooner*, p. 139.

Was it you or your brother that was killed in the War?

The advent of the Great War was a turbulent time for New College. Graduates were being trained as soldiers and a hospital was established in the garden. However, little evidence of this appears in Spooner's writings. In fact, the war years are strangely absent from his diaries.[11] Drawing from contemporary accounts, it seems that Spooner's role as Warden was largely uninterrupted by the War. He continued to go about his duties, including the traditional tour of College estates and the collection of rents. Despite this apparent lack of interest in what was happening on the continent, Spooner had a great correspondence with old members both in Britain and abroad during the War years. These include letters to John Balfour, who as an Oxford student had the bad luck to be studying German in Freiberg in 1914. He was subsequently interned for the duration of the war in a civilian prison,[12] and received many of what he described as charming letters from Spooner during that time.[13]

It is interesting that unlike many of his contemporaries, Spooner did not share in the general anti-German feeling during and after the First World War. Letters from the period show that his wartime correspondence was not limited to British alumni of the College only. Baron Leopold von Plessen, who as an undergraduate had an encounter with Spooner over the purchase of a gramophone, a device forbidden in College, was the recipient of a number of long letters from Spooner during his internship first in Gibraltar, and then England.[14]

Something that I find to be of great interest, particularly as we mark the centenary of the Great War, was Spooner's attitude to the deaths of German old members of College. When news of a casualty reached him, he insisted on posting their name alongside the list of College's war dead on the chapel door. When challenged, he calmly replied, 'They too are members of the College, and they too have given their lives for their country'.[15] This enlightened attitude taken by Spooner was followed up after the War by his insisting that their names be recorded on a tablet in the Ante-Chapel. The tablet was finally put in place in 1930, bearing only three names.

[11] ibid., p. 125.
[12] Stanley Weintraub, *A Stillness Heard Round the World* (London, 1985), p. 346.
[13] Hayter, *Spooner*, p. 126.
[14] ibid., p. 126.
[15] ibid., p. 127.

He spoke very slowly, often with hesitations . . .

Much to Spooner's chagrin, throughout his life he was best known for his namesake Spoonerisms.[16] He was well aware of this, remarking that he 'was better known for [his] defects than for any merits'.[17] However, before we go any further, we must identify what a Spoonerism is. A commonly recognised definition is the unintentional mix-up of parts or words, thoughts, and phrases, often resulting in humorous phrases or situations. Some well-known examples being 'it is kisstomary to cuss the bride' and 'is the bean dizzy?'[18] Did Spooner ever say such things? In short, yes, but they were never delivered so neatly. We can apply a general rule that the more ridiculous the Spoonerism, the more likely that it is made up. Most likely by undergraduates. In fact, there are only two references made to Spoonerisms in his diaries. The first from an entry for 9 May 1904. Spooner wrote of a conversation at dinner with the newspaper magnate George Newnes, in which the latter 'seemed to think he owed me some gratitude for the many "Spoonerisms" which I suppose have appeared in Tit Bits [a popular weekly magazine]'.[19] The second from 1924 where Spooner describes a conversation with an American woman he met at a concert, who upon discovering his name remarked that he was famous in America. In his own words, 'She professed to have found it a great pleasure to have sat with me and talked to me . . . for to have known a celebrity . . . means a good deal'.[20]

Like all good stories, there is an element of truth to Spooner's reputation. There are many contemporary accounts of spoken Spoonerisms, and like many who have looked into this topic I am in debt to William Hayter, Warden from 1958 to '76, who undertook most of the work verifying them. People who knew Spooner described him as having a high-pitched voice, and speaking very slowly and with many vocalised pauses. It is possible, as Potter suggests, that this slow hesitant form of speech was the result of internal over-editing[21]—it is well known after all that Spooner did not like his reputation. After delivering a speech at his last Gaude, he self-deprecatingly remarked, 'And now I suppose you will expect me to say one of those things'.[22]

At a meeting of the Political Economy Club Spooner was repeatedly overheard referring to 'Dr Childe's Friend' as 'Dr Friend's child'.[23] A first-hand account from Reginald Coupland, then a student in College, describes an encounter with Spooner outside the Chapel. Upon seeing Coupland Spooner said, 'Mr Coupland, you read the lesson very badly'. Coupland replied 'But, Sir, I didn't read the lesson', to which Spooner said 'Ah, I thought you didn't'.[24]

A better-known case is that of Stanley Casson, who when talking to Spooner for the first time was asked to dinner to 'meet our new Fellow, Casson'. Stanley, understandably confused by this said to Spooner 'But Warden, I am Casson'. Spooner calmly replied 'Never mind, come all the same'.[25]

In another widely corroborated story, while addressing a group of undergraduates Spooner said 'You will find as you grow older that the weight of rages will press harder and harder upon the employer'. One student reportedly said, 'I've been up for four years, and never

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[16] J. M. Potter, 'Dr Spooner and his Dysgraphia', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 69 (1976), p. 9.
[17] ibid., p. 2.
[18] The Best Spoonerisms (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/spoonerisms-best-spooner-lines/)
[19] Hayter, *Spooner*, p. 137.
[20] ibid., p. 138.
[21] Potter, 'Dr Spooner and his Dysgraphia', p. 6.
[22] Hayter, *Spooner*, p. 137.
[23] ibid., p. 138.
[24] ibid., p. 140.
[25] ibid., p. 140.

heard the Spoo make a Spoonerism before and now he makes a damned rotten one at the last minute'.[26]

While not being the type that we expect, we can confidently regard the above cases as authentic Spoonerisms. An interesting interpretation has been put forward by Potter, suggesting that due to Spooner's poor eyesight he had great difficulty recognising people, particularly large numbers of undergraduates.[27] We know from his own words that Spooner's eyesight was so poor that at school he 'had to apply for a special place' near the front of the class. This may well explain the large number of Spooneresque cases (such as that of Coupland and Casson) that have become part of his reputation.

Spoonerisms also showed themselves in apparent absent-mindedness and 'slips of action' to borrow a phrase from Potter. The most famous of this type comes from A. J. Toynbee, and is described in Hayter's biography of Spooner:

> The acted spoonerism was witnessed by my mother's old friend Eleanor Jourdain. At a dinner party in Oxford, she saw Dr Spooner upset a salt-cellar and then reach for a decanter of claret. He then poured claret on the salt, drop by drop, till he had produced the little purple mound which would have been the end-product if he had spilled claret on the table-cloth and had then cast a heap of salt on the pool to absorb it.[28]

His proclivity for slips of action can also be seen in another famous story. Spooner was entertaining a guest in the Warden's Lodgings, and when it came time to leave he offered to 'see [her] safely down the stairs' as they were quite dark. Spooner then proceeded to turn off the light, and escort the poor woman down the stairs in complete darkness.[29] Luckily, Spooner's daughter came to their rescue, and later corroborated this story.

Unlike stories of Spooner passed down through the New College oral tradition, Spooner's writings provide a more reliable way to gauge if he truly deserved his reputation. In many cases, apparently simple errors in his writing can often be regarded as a type of Spoonerism. Potter, who wrote at length on this topic, found only forty-five written errors in Spooner's papers (roughly 250,000 words).[30] Luckily, Spooner had a habit of crossing out written mistakes with a single line, allowing us to see the original word. This has presented us with a small window into his thought process. In one letter he wrote 'I am so glad to hear that you are at last relieved of your terrible burden of debt'. 'Debt' was promptly crossed out and replaced with 'anxiety'. There is an evident link between the two, as the former often causes the latter.

Figure 1 is a good example of Spooner's interesting thought processes. It features three noteworthy errors that, in Spooner's usual manner, have been crossed out with a single line. In an error of anticipation, Spooner first wrote words that he had meant to write exactly three words later. On the second line, 'operation' anticipates itself three words later, and the same goes for 'science' on the sixth line[31]. Potter found eight such mistakes throughout Spooner's papers, and is in keeping with contemporary accounts that Spooner's mind seemed to move at a pace faster than his mouth—or in this case pen—could keep up with.

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[26] Hayter, *Spooner*, p. 139.
[27] Potter, 'Dr Spooner and his Dysgraphia', p. 4.
[28] Hayter, *Spooner*, p. 142.
[29] Potter, 'Dr Spooner and his Dysgraphia', p. 3.
[30] ibid., p. 6.
[31] ibid., p. 2.

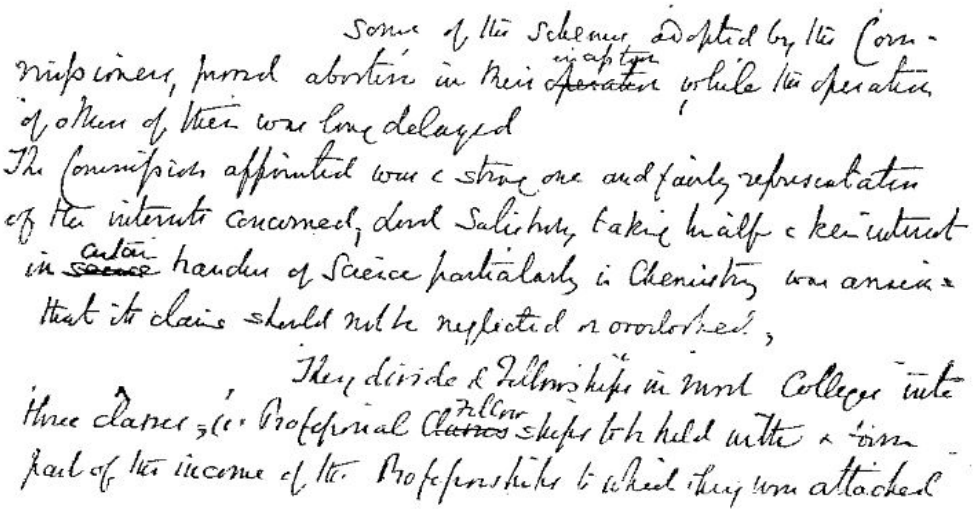

Figure 1: An example of Spooner's writing

A second piece of Spooner's writing (Figure 2), again shows us Spooner's slightly confused thought processes. Discussing examination results he writes, 'We seem to have held our heaps fairly evenly with other colleges', 'heaps' is crossed out and replaced with 'heads'. He goes on to write, 'female charms [supper?] added to normal undergraduate allurements are apt to be overwhelming', followed by 'whitless', which is changed to 'whirlwind', finally concluding with 'a whirlpool difficult to escape'.[32] Potter identified twenty-three similar errors throughout Spooner's writings.

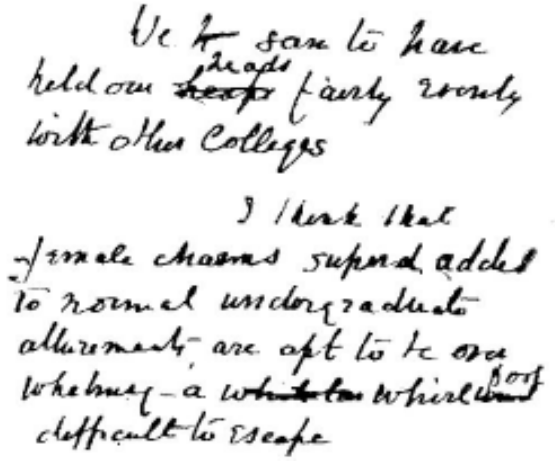

Figure 2: More of Spooner's writing

One last written error worth discussing is shown in Figure 3. Here Spooner seems undecided on how to separate the two words 'cow' and 'house'. While we have all at some point thought about the correct spelling of a word, this example taken from papers on College estates stands out, particularly Spooner's rather interesting final attempt to spell the word, writing 'co whouse'.[33] A student of Spooner's, Julian Huxley, observed that Spooner might have had a problem with what

[32] ibid., p. 3.
[33] ibid., p. 8.

he described as the 'association centres' of his brain. This may go some way to explain Spooner's difficulties in word usage.

Figure 3: An example of Spooner's writing

A moderately useful man . . .

After spending more than three quarters of his life in College, Spooner quietly retired in 1924. During a farewell party Spooner remarked:

> For the first quarter of my life I was too young to be a member of college. For the last quarter of my life I have been too old to be anything else but Warden. But for the remaining half of my life I think I may claim that I did what lay in my power to serve the College. And in that I found happiness and my great reward.[34]

He passed away peacefully six years later, leaving behind a legacy that lasts to this day. One that remains undoubtedly tied to his name is the Spoonerism, but we should remember that there was much more to him than that.

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[34] Hayter, *Spooner*, p. 174.