

"PHILO STILL HAS A NICE, ECCENTRIC QUALITY ABOUT IT"
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"It's the usual story," says Cynthia Frost, '77 FAS. "People don't learn of Philomathean until they've been here for a while."

We follow her to the Philomathean Society's suite of rooms on the fourth floor of College Hall. Clearly the society isn't underground, and Ms. Frost demonstrates that it isn't secret. She narrates its history and explains the items surrounding us and, in general, seems to be an informed and practical guide rather than the society's president, or moderator, which is what she happens to be.

The stairs from the third to the fourth floor are carpeted -- a rarity for student areas. But the particular elegance of the rooms themselves is of scholarship, the genuinely academic sort. We expect to be told that, here, classical languages are still required for graduation.

That impression comes from the furniture. Most of it has been salvaged from other parts of the University by the alert hand of Charles F. Ludwig, '53 C, '56 L, a former moderator who has taken a lasting interest in the Philomathean Society. The bench where the officers sit during the meetings is from the law school, where it was used as the judge's bench in mock trials; two candelabra are also from the law school; the pews for members were once in the chapel, which had been located two floors below; the glass bookcases in the society's private library are from the English department; the books themselves, from the libraries of some Philomathean alumni.

The rooms aren't musty. We automatically run a finger across an accessible but hidden edge of molding: no dust. Yet the atmosphere surely imbues us with the stern purpose of yesterday's scholarship. Unfortunately, we are only half-listening to Ms. Frost, as we force ourselves to return to the present.

"This is a plaster replica of the Rosetta Stone," she is saying, pointing to a cast contained in a glass case on the wall. "The tradition is that in 1856 the British Museum sent it to the American Philosophic Society, but the postman confused us for them. I don't know if I ought to be perpetuating that undocumented story," she whispers.

What the society did with the casting, however, is well documented. Two Philomathean Society students collated its trilingual inscription (hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek) with the Lepsius text of the corresponding inscription on the wall of the temple at Philae and translated it accurately, including some hieroglyphics never before rendered. Their report was published in color, had two editions in the late 1850s, and gained them international scholarly acclaim. "Nothing possible to a man," one of them said later, "ought to trouble a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and of the Philomathean Society."

The sense that "Philo" -- so-called by those in the know -- is a bit above it all was sown at the organization's inception in the 1813 as a student intellectual society. Thirteen of the undergraduate body of 41 were chapter members. (The society's constitution permits 50 members now; there are 8,196 undergraduates.) Housed first in the building intended for the President of the United States during the 1790s, when Philadelphia was the national capital, it developed a library which was in effect the University library for many decades. In 1838, it helped see that American history became part of the curriculum by inviting William Bradford Reed to orate on the value of studying the subject; 16 years later, Reed became Penn's first teacher of American history.

The society's later activities expanded to debating, drama, and literary exercises ("lit ex"). Debates, especially with the rival Zelosophic Society, drew thousands to various Philadelphia auditoriums. ("Zelo" has passed away several times during the past century and always revives. Its present leader is Mark L. McQueary, '77 FAS.) Just prior to the Civil War, according to Philo's meticulously kept archives, a debate on slavery took place while two pistols lay atop the lectern which separated the debaters.

The Philomathean Society became incorporated in 1916, partly to protect its members from being personally responsible for debts incurred by the society's dramatic productions. And none too soon. In 1917, a production which required 1,500 costumes lost \$19,000. Philo quickly recovered the loss and earned a surplus of \$860 by holding a patriotic rally in Franklin Field.

Through the years, Philo began the organizations which are now known as The Daily Pennsylvanian, Punch Bowl, the Debate Council, and the Penn Players. Currently, it sponsors the Faculty Lecture Series on Thursday afternoons, a series of poetry and fiction readings in the English department, and a concert series on Sunday evenings; it publishes *Era*, the literary magazine; it maintains its library and an art gallery; and it invites an Annual Orator to address the University community each spring. On March 25 and 26, the society is sponsoring, for the first time since its sesquicentennial celebration, a Philomathean alumni weekend, alumni have been invited to attend a meeting to see how the society is and a banquet to reminisce on how it was.

Occasionally, the society puts together a full program, as it did last fall by sponsoring a Shakespeare Symposium, which included an exhibit of the first folio and early quarto editions of Shakespeare's works, readings, lectures, and a musical performance called "The Supernatural in Shakespeare." The entire series of events had begun modestly as an idea to invite former Penn Professor Alfred B. Harbage, '24 C, '29 Gr, '54 Hon, to speak on Shakespeare (in his junior year, Harbage served as moderator of Philo). But he died, and his death inspired Philo to expand the lecture into a program in his memory. (His widow, Eliza Finnesey Harbage, '24 Ed, plans to donate his books to the society. She met her then-future husband at Philo in 1921.)

How does Philo perpetuate itself? Prospective members, who somehow find out about it and indicate an interest, are invited to a meeting. If they like what they see, they come to an interview scheduled in the late afternoon. ("Traditions abound in Philo," says Ms. Frost, and the timing of the interview happens to be one of them.) Eight interviewers search out the prospect's interest in the society. Later, at a Philo meeting, the prospect performs something pertaining to arts or scholarship. "It's a way of getting to know who the person is by what the person does," explains Ms. Frost.

At a society's meeting on Friday night (another tradition), we hear a presentation. About 40 people listen as Regina R. DiMedio, '80 FAS, stands to announce her piano selection, Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 90. "When I was young, I played his earlier works," she says, "and later learned he was a revolutionary, no classical like Haydn and Beethoven." She stops and, pressing her hands together, says she means Mozart. Then she bursts out, "I'm really nervous -- this is really exciting for me." Her spirit is infectious, and when she dedicates her presentation to her family and her "dormitory buddies," the audience laughs and claps. Her performance shines and receives long, admiring applause. (In the private membership meeting later, she will be admitted to Philo.)

The business meeting which follows is like a classical poem, bound by rigid rules which are stretched and threatened with rupture by the poet's imagination. In this instance, the constraint is Robert's Rules of Order, which are learily thrown into disorder by ad lib comments, allies, and retorts. Two censors morum keep decorum. Once of them announces that Harold Goldner, '77 FAS is fined a dollar. The infraction happens so quickly that we don't notice. Nor does he. "A buck? What for?" he asks. (He must have paid up, for two meetings from now, he will succeed Ms. Frost as moderator.)

The scriba (secretary) reviews a paper on the sexual connotations of computer jargon, with examples. Philo minutes, of which the reviews are an important tradition, date back to 1813. They are disinterred when, as happens, members who wrote them or who are mentioned in them become famous. The treasurer gives his report. As if he stepped from the tradition of treasurer's reports made famous by Robert Benchley, he says, "I won't make it short tonight," and then, to loud laughter, reads the insurance policy of the art gallery.

The business tonight is the selection of the Annual Orator. The nominees have been chosen at a previous meeting. They are Susan Brownmiller, Anthony Burgess, Linus Pauling, Chaim Potok, Bob and Ray, Richard Armour, Noam Chomsky, '49 C, '55 Gr, E. B. White, Edward Gorey, Stephen Sondheim, and Marcel Ophulus. There is sentiment for inviting more than one. Goldner, with a sense of obligation to tradition, says, "One must be the Annual Orator, and we'll make up an excuse for the other." Some don't recognize Bob and Ray. "A comedy team from your parents' day," someone says, killing their candidacy. Kate Llewellyn, '78 FAS, chairperson on poetry, holds out for a series of poetry readings. Tradition, we expect, will prevail.

Goldner rises. "It's a Philo custom," he says, "to send a letter to Thomas Pynchon, a very great writer who accepts no invitation to speak to anyone, much less us. Shall we send it?"

"Don't send it," someone says, and a lesser tradition expires.

We do not stay for the lit ex, one of the original traditions, a humorous presentation by a member. We feel we've gained a sense of what is special about Philo. "Philo has long identified what is central," Ms. Frost has already said, "excellence of wit, of intellect, of good fun. There's a quality about it."