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## John Langdon Sibley on Taming Undergraduate Passions, 1860-1868

Brian Sullivan

In entry after entry in his personal diary, Harvard librarian John Langdon Sibley recorded the behavior of Harvard men who inspired and dismayed him.<sup>1</sup> He offered a moving account of the humble beginnings of historian and Harvard president Jared Sparks and a stark appraisal of an esteemed Harvard alumnus and honorable judge who was stealing library materials. His greatest dismay, however, was reserved for the antics of Harvard students.

Born in Union, Maine, in 1804, Sibley graduated from Harvard College in 1825 and from the Divinity School in 1829. After a stint as the minister of Stow, Massachusetts, and as an editor of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, he returned to Harvard in 1841 as assistant librarian. He became head of the Harvard College Library 15 years later, serving until his retirement in 1877 at the age of 73.

Sibley's determination to locate, preserve, and publish sources relating to New England and Harvard history led to his multivolume work, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Harvard College*, familiarly known as *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*. A bachelor until 1866 (when he married Charlotte Cook), Sibley inhabited quarters in Divinity Hall for nearly 33 years. From that perch he evaluated the behavior of Harvard undergraduates.

On January 12, 1860, he wrote:

On returning to Cambridge I learned that a special policeman who had been stationed for many weeks in the chapel, allowed a student to enter & place on the desk a Bible, which, it turns out, was stolen from Yale college, probably by way of exchange for one of the two, stolen from Appleton Chapel when it was entered sometime since. When the rogue was going away he seized him & requested him to let him put some iron manacles on his wrist, whereupon the student William Hathaway Forbes, from Milton, a member of the Junior Class struck him a dreadful blow in the face & forehead with "billy." The policeman presented his revolver fired it into the air & told him he would shoot him instantly if he did not suffer him to put the manacles on him. The student then wanted to be taken to the watchhouse. The officer said no. So they remained there from 2 to 6 o'clock, when Jones, the Janitor & Sexton, came to open the chapel & build the fire. Then Forbes appealed to Jones, who knew him, to prevail on the officer, whose face was covered with blood, to let him go. Jones replied that he was not a "man in authority." Accordingly the officer passed Forbes over to the Police Judge, & went home to bed. Judge Ladd would not admit him to bail, but sent him to jail, as Dr. Wyman testified that the officer was not out of danger, & if the blow had fallen a little differently it would have killed him. Forbes is not reckless but remarkable for his philanthropy & benevolence among the sick & poor students. So goes the report to-day.<sup>2</sup>

These comments were followed on January 14, 1860, by this entry:

It seems that the students had a meeting yesterday & passed spirited, able & specious resolutions, which appear in to-day's newspapers, in opposition to the governments employing armed police. The merits of the case seem to resolve themselves into this. Shall the students or the Faculty rule? Forbes would have escaped but for the pistol. The students say nothing about the impropriety of Forbes's being armed.<sup>3</sup>

No doubt, the Forbes incident reinforced concerns about the moral fiber of the undergraduates among Sibley and his colleagues. What was to be done to enhance their seemingly coarse character? A junior, Leonard Case Alden, A.B. 1861, offered a solution in an article in the July 1860 issue of *Harvard Magazine* (a periodical that predates today's version of the same name). Alden offered what may have been a novel approach to elevating the social graces of the institution's male students--the admittance of women to Harvard College.

I intend only to notice slightly how the manners of both sexes would be benefited by being accustomed to meet in the recitation and reception rooms. . . . We very well know that a man's conduct towards men is often marked by coarseness and bluntness; and it is to be feared that women do not always treat those of their own sex with all possible consideration and courtesy. But intercourse between the sexes effects great changes. Awkwardness becomes gracefulness; coarseness is softened into

politeness; and rough words are modulated into a kind and gentle language.

Do not tell me that it would be improper or indelicate to open our colleges to woman; do not pretend that her character would lose its charms by contact with coarser natures; do not endeavor to argue that alike our own interests and hers would be best separation. . . . if you shut woman out of College, you should also, for the sake of consistency, shut her out of the parlor and the reception-room. . . . will you tell us that, instead of cleansing the young men from the stain of licentiousness which rests upon them, we should only pollute the spotless purity of our sisters; and that, by our endeavor to repress the lust which now gratifies itself only upon the fallen, which should entrap the innocent in a fatal snare and turn the College into a brothel? . . . Public sentiment among the female portion of the college community would frown so severely upon every lapse from virtue that such a scandal would seldom, if ever, occur; and in this safeguard would be found not less effective than the watchful eye of a parent and the protecting influences of home.

The purifying of woman's presence and society [in the College] would be constantly and increasingly felt, and the young men, it is to be hoped, would soon learn to despise and tame the unholy passions which many of them now so shamelessly indulge.<sup>4</sup>

The Alden article appears to have met with some reaction. Another undergraduate, Frederic Baylies Allen, a member of the class of 1863, responded with the following verse in the October issue of *Harvard Magazine*:

Woman in College

As I sat on my window-seat, perched on high,

(For I room in attic, just next to the sky,)

Perusing the article for last July,

A very odd article met my eye,--

'T was a "Woman in College!"

I read it with care, laid the magazine down,

Leaned my head on my elbow, and mused thereon,

I suppose I slept for I saw in my snooze

A vision or a dream, which we'll call if you choose,--

"Woman in College."

"T was something as follows;--Old Jones rang the bell

With his usual vigor, when lo, strange to tell!

From entry of Stoughton and Holworthy too,

Massachusetts and Hollis, there burst in my view,---

The "Women in College."

Ah! you'd better believe, 't was a beautiful sight,  
 As they passed down the paths on their way to recite,  
 Brave youths and fair maidens in company go,  
 And their peg-tops and crinolines sway to and fro.---  
 Ah! 'tis jolly,---this "Women in College."

See that chap on the steps, with such impudent grace,  
 Explaining to Mary a difficult place,  
 One hand holds the book, while the other is placed,  
 With careless assurance, around the fair waist---  
 Of this "Woman in College."

But see these two girls! They're coming this way.  
 Just look at their head-gear! Now isn't that gay?  
 A wee bit of a cap, with a "63" on it,  
 Why bless me! That's surely the Soph'more class bonnet,  
 Of the "Women in College."

But they've met a gay Sophomore,--hear what they say.  
 "Why, Billy, my boy, how's your health to-day?  
 What's this sorrowful story, about you, we hear?  
 That you're summoned and sent to the country a year.

Away from the “Women in College”?

“Rather rough on you, Bill! You’re an unlucky bird.”

“Not a bit of it, Lucy! Why, have n’t you heard

That lovely Miss Smith and Adelaide Brown

Are to rusticate with me,---a few miles from town?

Ain’t it jolly, this “Women in College?”...

And here I awoke. ‘T was only a dream!

How dreary and cold the College did seem.

Ah, ladies! your presence would send a bright gleam

Of sunlight upon our dull, stupid routine

Of studies and deeds, and would make “all serene.”. . .<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of undergraduate fantasies, women remained outside Harvard’s lecture halls and the men unpurified. On May 15, 1868, Sibley recorded another incident involving the students:

Last evening, five tar barrels, one filled with shavings, kerosene, pistol-wickers, etc. carried into the southwest corner of Gore Hall, by the tower & piled up; but the students being discovered fled. At first it was thought a design was to set fire to the Library; but subsequently it seemed more probable that they were placed there to be carted to different parts of the college yard to be ignited simultaneously & excite a general alarm.<sup>6</sup>



There is no evidence that Sibley supported the admission of women, but in his own way he supported female education. College Library records show that he frequently checked out books on behalf of female readers, from the poet Caroline Orne and Mary McCrossen, his housemaid.<sup>7</sup>

Notes

1. John Langdon Sibley's diary, Harvard University Archives [hereafter, HUA], call no. HUG 1791.72, is also known as his "Private Journal."
2. Sibley's Journal, 519.
3. Ibid.
4. *Harvard Magazine* 6, no. 56 (July 1860): 353, HUA call no. HUK 544.
5. *Harvard Magazine* 7, no. 58 (Oct. 1860): 59, HUA call no. HUK 544.
6. Sibley's Journal, 790.
7. Records of the Harvard College Library, Charging Records, HUA call no. UAIII 50.15.60.