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G. A. Cevasco
St. John's University

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**GILBERT AND SULLIVAN AND THE BROOKLYN
BRIDGE: TWO NEWLY DISCOVERED LETTERS**

G.A. Cevasco and Richard Harmond

St. John's University

Gilbert and Sullivan first visited the United States in 1879, mainly to present their authorized version of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the operetta which established them as an institution in England. The work played to packed houses in London, and since Americans were just beginning to accept most things British as models of superior taste, it soon became a rage in the States.

American publishers and theatrical managers were making fortunes with *Pinafore* while Gilbert and Sullivan gnashed their teeth. They had learned that the operetta, just as popular in the States as in England, was being performed in no less than eight American theaters in pirated editions. "I will not have a libretto of mine produced if Americans are going to steal it," Gilbert complained, "not that I need the money so much, but it upsets my digestion."¹

The authorized American edition of *Pinafore* was presented on 1 December 1879 in New York at the Fifth Avenue Theatre. The cream of society turned out for the premier performance. When the curtain came down, the operetta received a tremendous ovation. Among those in the enthusiastic audience was Robert Barnwell Roosevelt. Today, if remembered at all, this one-time prominent member of the Roosevelt family, is summarily described as Theodore Roosevelt's uncle.² In 1879, however, Teddy was a student at Harvard, while his Uncle Rob, sportsman, politician, author, as well as former congressman and newspaper editor, was the leading member of his well-established Knickerbocker family.

Unlike his nephew, Robert Roosevelt was something of a bon vivant. He enjoyed the good life, which, fortunately for his peace of mind, he could afford. As he was clever and witty to boot, he liked to entertain celebrities. In 1876, for example, after seeing Bret Harte's play *Two Men of Sandy Bar*, he wrote to arrange a meeting. Harte responded on 21 September 1876 and in his letter gave a good account of the theme of his play, "the domination of a strong man over a weaker one." Unfortunately, the meeting between Harte and Robert Roosevelt—if one eventually took place—cannot be documented.³ Meetings that Roosevelt had with another literary luminary can be documented. For example, in 1882, he met with Oscar Wilde. On 8 January, to be specific, Wilde responded to one of Roosevelt's letters.

They met at several receptions and on 22 July of the same year, Roosevelt took Wilde out on a yacht to view Long Island's Great South Bay.⁴

Given his interest in meeting celebrated figures, especially those in the literary and theatrical fields, it seems only natural that Roosevelt would contact William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. At the time Roosevelt was one of three Commissioners appointed to oversee the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge; taking advantage of his position, Roosevelt invited both Gilbert and Sullivan—four years before it was officially opened—to inspect one of the modern world's greatest engineering feats.⁵ Roosevelt's letters to Gilbert and Sullivan apparently were not preserved, but two of their letters to him have recently surfaced.⁶

On 18 December, Gilbert wrote the following:

27 Waverly Place
18th December, 1879

Dear Mr. Roosevelt,

Your letter, addressed to the Union Club, only reached me this morning, as my term of honorary membership expired some time ago. I am very much obliged to you for so kindly repeating your offer to show us the Brooklyn Bridge. Unfortunately we are working at the rehearsals of our new piece⁷ every day—but if you will allow us to postpone our visit until after the 27th, when our time will be at our own—and at your—disposal,—we shall look upon it as a fresh proof of the kindly feeling that prompted your letter.

I am,

Very truly yours,
W.S. Gilbert

The letter from Sullivan reads:

Union Club,
Fifth Avenue & 21st St.,
Thursday [no date]

Dear Mr. Roosevelt,

Pray forgive the delay in answering your very kind and friendly letter—but I know very well that you will be indulgent. When you produce *your* new opera you will understand the work and worry of engaging band, chorus,

etc., and rehearsing principals, and trying to keep up with business correspondence.⁸

I need scarcely tell you that it would interest me immensely to see the new Brooklyn Bridge, and I could not see it under better auspices than your own. When I return from Boston and get well ahead with the rehearsals here, I shall feel a little freer, and shall be happy to arrange any day and time convenient to you for our excursion.

The more oysters the better!⁹ In the meantime I hope to see you tomorrow evening.

Yours very truly,
Arthur Sullivan

Although documentation cannot be found to support an actual visit to the Brooklyn Bridge, the above letters allow the inference that Gilbert and Sullivan did so as guests of Robert Roosevelt. What is a bit surprising, however, is that as librettist Gilbert used many words pertaining to water—*streams, rivers, brooks, channels, floods, tides*, and even *rills* and *rivulets*—but he did not refer to structures required to pass over such liquid bodies. No mention of the word bridge can be found in his libretti.¹⁰ Also, not without a modicum of interest is the fact that Sullivan apparently did not allude to the Brooklyn Bridge in his American diary or in frequent letters he wrote from the States during 1879-1880 to his mother, Mary Clementina Sullivan, in London.¹¹

NOTES

¹Hesketh Pearson, *Gilbert and Sullivan: A Biography* (New York, 1935), p.112.

²Richard Harmond is working on Robert Barnwell Roosevelt's biography.

³G.A. Cevasco and Richard Harmond, "Bret Harte to Robert Roosevelt on *Two Men of Sandy Bar*: A Newly Discovered Letter," *ALR*, 21 (1988), 58-62.

⁴Richard Harmond and G.A. Cevasco, "Another Wilde Letter: A Recently Discovered Letter to Robert Barnwell Roosevelt," *N&Q*, 232 (1987), 498-499.

⁵See David McCullough, *The Great Bridge* (New York, 1972).

⁶Copies of these letters, in typescripts by M. Fortescue Picard entitled "The House of Roosevelt and Its Background," Part

II, pp. 357 and 358, are located at the Theodore Roosevelt Association in Oyster Bay, New York. The letters have been released for publication by John Gable, Executive Director of the Association, to whom an expression of gratitude is due.

⁷The "new piece" was *The Pirates of Penzance*.

⁸Sullivan was feverishly working on *The Pirates of Penzance*. Gilbert had completed the libretto before leaving England and Sullivan was into the music. He had written the songs for the second act when he received the final libretto from Gilbert and had sketched out a number of songs for the first act. The songs for the second act Sullivan brought to the States, but he had carelessly left sketches for the first act in England and had to re-write from memory. By continually staying up until 5:30 each morning, he managed to finish the first act and score the entire work before the end of the year. (See Pearson, pp. 117-118.)

⁹Sullivan, as Roosevelt doubtless knew, was addicted to oysters. Pearson notes that when Sullivan was worn out with fatigue and had trouble sleeping he would wander off to the nearest club for oysters and champagne (p. 119).

¹⁰Geoffrey Dixon, *The Gilbert and Sullivan Concordance: A Word List to W.S. Gilbert Libretti for the Fourteen Savoy Operas* (New York, 1987).

¹¹The Gilbert and Sullivan Collection at the Pierpont Morgan Library includes the volume of Sullivan's Diary written during the time of his stay in the States, as well as his American letters to his mother. (Frederic Woodbridge Wilson, Curator of the Gilbert and Sullivan Collection at the Pierpont Morgan, was kind enough to extend an invitation to Professors Cevasco and Harmond to examine the Collection. He also informed them that although the whole of Sullivan's pre-1882 received correspondence seems to be lost it is possible that Robert Roosevelt's letter to Gilbert—since as a rule he preserved his correspondence—may someday be located among the Gilbert Papers in the British Library.)