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A SHORT HISTORY OF LITERARY AND ATHLETIC SOCIETY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The idea of founding a society for the students of University College seems to have been present from the very inception of college as a separate entity from the University of Toronto. University College was created by the act of parliament in 1853, and in that year students began “a movement for the establishment of a debating society” [1, 3].

By forming such a society students at University College were fitting into transatlantic story that first began in Scotland in the eighteenth century, was carried to the rest of British Isles and the United States. In the United States especially, such societies had been dedicated to the development of the oratory, the cultivation of all the aspects of the life of letters, including speaking, writing and poetry.

The literary and scientific society of University College (as it was first known) had similar objectives as the Scottish, English and American student societies.

The Lit was intended to be a training ground for gentlemen. It offered members the opportunity to debate and criticize the other thoughts and arguments without resource to insult or foul play.

Apart from the general knowledge the men gained from participating in essay writing, readings and debates, the Lit has also attempted to instill knowledge of society through its annual *Conversazion*, begun in 1864. The *Conversazion* was an evening of music, food, scientific display, and public lecture open to the whole university and to the community at large , with the only limits being a maximum attendance of 1,500 and the prohibition of dancing [1, 4].

The activities of the Lit were often criticized in the wilder college community. For example “the closed debates”, with their fixed debaters and set time limits, as well as restriction on what subjects could be debated, were often disparaged . For a two-year period, younger undergraduates seized on these

limitations and created the Forum, which in 1883 and 1884 held meetings off-campus and considered political in open debates. The Forum was one of the short-lived examples of a number of specialized societies that sprang up as rivals to the Lit. The Mathematical and Physical Society, The Natural Science Association, the Modern Languages Club carried on activities that for some seemed to be more relevant to the actual needs of University College students.

The Lit also became the battleground for rival political factions. In 1887 one acid-tongued correspondent accused the Lit of having gone too far in election rowdyism and partisanship, asking “Whether we are to have an election for the Society, or the Society for the election?” In 1904 the University College announced that it has consented to allow the Lit to discuss any questions, even those bearing on Canadian party politics. Around the same time, the Lit introduced a secret ballot and abandoned the practice of holding “scraps”, in which the outcome of an election was decided by “Brute Force” preventing voters from reaching the polls. These changes were contemporary with the observations that there was a lack of university-trained men in Canadian political life.

During the early years of the twentieth century, the Lit began to change its methods of operating to better reflect the needs of university graduates in later political life. In 1908/09 one of the factions, the old Lit party, campaigned for office on a platform of introducing cabinet government to the running of the society. In the fall of 1910 this was finally achieved, and responsible government arrived at University College. The Lit could now discuss political issues freely, organized on parliamentary principles [1, 5].

The Lit was reported in March 1920 to be “struggling wearily along” with almost no attendance at its meetings. The literary and Scientific Society of University College held its last meeting on March 8 1921, and the Literary and Athletic Society, with compulsory fees was established in its place. The reinvented Lit moved into a new role: coordinating all the various activities and interests of the college. This included the establishment in 1926, of the University College magazine, eventually known as “the Undergraduate”, the creation of the university

college Follies (a collection of student-written sketches performed annually), and perhaps the most important, the holding of dances- the annual Art Balls, buying equipment such as new pianos [1, 6].

The Lit also stayed itself as a political body, throughout of the 1930s, `40s, `50s, claiming the right to represent all students at University College. This often resulted in conflict with the Students` Administrative Council (SAC), the central student body at the University of Toronto and the official representative of student opinion on campus. Any member of the Lit had the right to propose a motion at an open meeting, if he could gain the assent of twenty of his fellow students, he could order the calling of a special open meeting to discuss this concerns [1, 7].

Two incidents from the early 1950s outline the conflicts this policy created. In October 1950 the Lit passed a complex motion, the import of which was that the society would object to the removal of professors of the university because of communist leanings. The other incident was connected with the Russian student Exchange. A visit of Russian students to Canada was proposed in 1950 and brought before the National Federation of Canadian University students (NFCUS). NFCUS stalled on the issue, for the fear that accepting the proposal would alienate the fiercely anti-communist Quebec universities and destroy the federation. NFCUS went on to formally reject the exchange, which led to an emergency meeting of the Lit to discuss the Russian visit. The Lit briefly considered running it own exchange with Russian students, but the idea didn't make any headway.

REFERENCES

1. Charles Morden Levi, *Comings and goings: university students in Canadian society, 1854-1973* / Levi, Charles Morden - McGill-Queen`s Press, Canada., 2003. – 172 p.