



THE PORCELLIAN AT 200



*Gathering in what history may record as the final
days of the final clubs, Brothers raise the perennial call:
"Song! Story! Recitation! or Strip!"*

by JOHN SEDGWICK

It was exactly 200 years ago that a young Harvardian named Joseph McKean, of the class of 1794, achieved immortality by serving a roasted pig to his confreres in a doddering social organization called The Argonauts. In honor of this repast, he renamed the group the Pig Club, which soon evolved into the far tonier-sounding Porcellian Club. The Porcellian today is the oldest continuously operating social club in America. To honor the bicentennial anniversary, two hundred Brothers Porcellian (as members call themselves) gathered in Cambridge this February for a

weekend of secret porcine festivities highlighted by a black-tie dinner in the club's banquet hall and, no doubt, the ancient P.C. toast:

Here's a health to our Founder, McKean,
That man of immaculate Fame,
Whose heart was so big,
Who nourished a pig,
And gave us our time-honored name.

Ah, the Porcellian. Whose heart is so heavy that it does not lift a little at the sweet sound of it? The word alone evokes a languorous, aristocratic scene from the late nineteenth century, full of wit and extravagance, as illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, with text by Oscar Wilde. Or have I succumbed to what's termed *pig-fever*, characterized by a burning desire to be a Porker?

Harvard has other final clubs nowadays—the A.D., the Fly, the Owl, the Spee among them—and no doubt they have their loyalists, too. But the others seem to be mere frats by comparison. Indeed, the late Doug Kenney '68, a former Spee president, drew on his years at that club for the ultimate frat

Departed Porkers

Despite its limiting reliance on solid Brahmin stock and its insistence that what William James, M.D. 1869, called the Bitch Goddess, success, not figure in the selection process, the Porcellian's membership has done pretty well. Among the ranks of the dead:

Architect **H. H. Richardson**, class of 1859, A.M. '72

Soldier **Robert Gould Shaw**, class of 1860, who led the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first regiment of blacks from a free state mustered into federal service

Jurist **Oliver Wendell Holmes**, class of 1861, LL.B. '66, LL.D. '95

Politician and author **Henry Cabot Lodge**, class of 1871, LL.B. '75, Ph.D. '76, LL.D. '04

Writer, soldier, explorer, politician **Theodore Roosevelt**, class of 1880, LL.D. '02. TR was so enamored of the club that he bestowed upon it a number of the boars' heads that hang in the club's banquet hall and also a hippopotamus that he had somehow transformed into a Chippendale couch for its clubroom. Delighted that his daughter Alice chose to marry a Brother, politician Nicholas Longworth, class of 1891, Roosevelt gaily noted this fact in a letter to Kaiser Wilhelm detailing the engagement: "Nick and I are both members of the Porc, you know."

Defender of the Americas Cup and inventor of contract bridge **Harold S. Vanderbilt** '07

Financier **Richard Whitney** '11, four-time president of the New York Stock Exchange, who swindled and went to Sing Sing, where other prisoners called him "Mister" and quickly elected him captain of the baseball team

Governor of Massachusetts **Leverett Saltonstall** '14, LL.B. 17

Newspaper publisher and solo-transatlantic-sailor *extraordinaire* **Philip S. Weld** '36

movie, *Animal House*; the others are little better. No less an authority than Cleveland Amory '39 placed the Porcellian at the pinnacle of Harvard society in *The Proper Bostonians*, with only the A.D. anywhere close. (It is said that the greatest disappointment in life to visit Franklin D. Roosevelt '04, LL.D. '29, was failing to make the Porcellian and having to make do with the Fly.) But the A.D. has fallen off badly in recent years (one horrified P.C. man calls it "Liberty Hall") and the rest of the clubs—good Lord. Only the Porc remains anywhere close to pure. As one member said, explaining why he joined, "I couldn't afford for my club to be just another place to hang out and party."

Like being a priest or a mafioso, being a Brother has always transcended most other earthly loyalties. P.C. man Owen Wister, of the class of 1892—author of *The Virginian* and, more importantly, of the Porc's anthem, "The Club Song"—declared that his bond to the old club was so exalted it could be "felt but not analyzed." One cannot resign. Indeed, one is a member for life *and then some*. More than one Brother, when he has shuffled off his mortal coil, has left it at the club; one old boy is installed in a clubhouse urn, another was allegedly buried under a rosebush (long gone) in the garden (now paved).

To the world, the Porcellian maintains a reputation so celestial that it transcends Harvard altogether and is rivaled only by Yale's Skull and Bones as the preeminent college society. Skull and Bones, however, selects its members for accomplishment and routinely taps the editor of the Yale *Daily News* and the captain of the football team to become members *ex officio*; the Porcellian seeks out the more elusive qualities of virtue, amiability, and charm. It is less a junior achievers club than, as one member puts it, "a circle of friends." As another Brother explains, "We're looking for someone you'd want to go on a long train ride with." A very long train ride indeed.

The entertainment aspect of being a P.C. man, however, is paramount. As with all P.C. get-togethers, the 200th anniversary banquet doubtless culminated in the perennial call: "Song! Story! Recitation! or Strip!" It is always a supreme moment. George Plimpton '48 went in for mock epic poems; he recalls reciting a "huge" fictional account of a football game between the Porcellian Club and the A.D. in which the Porcellian emerged victorious "under extremely difficult circumstances." Only one P.C. man has ever resorted to disrobing. "He calculated all his assets and liabilities and decided to bare his greatest gift," says one Porker. Quite a member, apparently. He is immortalized as Brother Tripod.

In the P.C.'s quest for a few good men, it has historically been guided by such markers as the right families (Cabots, Lowells, Seares), the right schools (Groton, St. Mark's, and St. Paul's) and the right cities (Boston, Philadelphia, and New York). The Porcellian is not, in short, for everyone. It has taken, on average, only eleven clubmen a year since its founding, bringing the total race of Porkers, dead and alive, to a little over 2,000.

The club publishes a list of the membership each year (under green covers, adorned with a boar's head), and it is surprising to see what names pop up: besides Plimpton, there is arms negotiator Paul Nitze '28, LL.D. '86; Congressman Hamilton Fish '47; *Gandhi*-producer Josiah Child '48; Chase N. Peterson '52, M.D. '56, who retires this June as president of the University of Utah; Merrill Lynch's head of capital Michael von Clemm '57; U.S. ambassador to the Philippines Nicholas Platt



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The Porcellian's long room (top left), morning room (top right), and front room (left), as shown in photographs published in 1891 in the club's account of its centennial celebration. A member assures this magazine that the photographs give a fair representation of how the place looks today. In style the Porcellian is Men's Club Antique: dark-paneled, bookish (with thousands of leatherbound classics and a complete collection of *Punch* magazines), seedy in the genteel manner, and filled with bizarre mementos, among them a music box given by the Morgan family that is of Morgan proportion. It is the size of a grand piano and plays nothing but Beethoven's Fifth. Or would, if it worked.

'57; Arizona politician J. Fife Symington III '68; and Colorado Senator Timothy Wirth '61, Ed.M. '65, who defeated none other than a fellow clubman, Terence Considine '69, J.D. '71, to win his seat.

But the eye strays to a few other names on the list, like John II Kwun '90, Eli Gabriel Attie '89, and Ronald SukBae Lee '90, and the eye pops. Yes, the Porc has gone democratic. A black was admitted in 1983, a black from St. Paul's to be sure, but a black nonetheless. He was followed by a black from Andover, who astonished the membership by singing the Motown hit "Take a Good Look at My Face" when the call came up for a song during the initiation banquet. Jews, Koreans, Filipinos, Chinese, and Ethiopians are on the list. The Ethiopian is named Selassie, and the joke among the cognoscenti is that he was let in because the clubmen assumed he was royalty. (He's not—in Ethiopia the surname Selassie is as common as Jones is here.) All this leaves older clubmen, in the standard P.C. phrase, "shocked and horrified." But they shouldn't be, necessarily. For the new inductees are, despite their foreign-sounding names, for the most part just as preppy as their predecessors—Selassie, for instance, went to Buckley and Andover. They are simply not WASPs.

What is probably more alarming is the club's new insistence on observing the state's alcohol regulations, prohibiting the

serving of liquor to anyone under 21. Nowadays, the club no longer provides booze on the premises (although members may still bring their own), and that really is a shift. Drinking has always been to the club what gas is to a limo. In his memoirs, the publisher and P.C. man Cass Canfield '19 calculated that his lifetime intake of liquor would fill a tank ten feet by thirteen by two, no doubt much of it consumed at the Porcellian. He detailed the club's annual drinkfest competition, in which he was invariably a leading contender: honiarty and gin before breakfast, a quart of champagne at breakfast, then a martini an hour until lunch, whereupon two martinis and another quart of champagne, then martinis on the hour till dinner, then two preprandial martinis, another quart of champagne with dinner, and hourly postprandial Scotches and sodas till midnight. Anyone left standing won.

The Porcellian Club may sound like it is situated in another galaxy; in fact, it occupies a large, five-story brick building at 1324 Massachusetts Avenue, which also houses J. August and the Yenching Restaurant, and it is here that the Brothers trooped for the 200th. Those who don't already know the club is there would have few reasons to suspect. It presents little to the world except a black door with a boar's head

above it, and, on the floor above that, a peculiar mirror that, according to legend, works like a kind of periscope to allow the clubmen to gaze down upon the pedestrians below without being seen. For the same reason, it is a club rule never to turn the lights on inside until dusk, when the shades are pulled. To the street, consequently, the Porcellian's windows are always dark. The door is locked, and there is no bell.

It isn't easy for a nonmember to be admitted to the building. One doesn't absolutely *have* to have saved the free world to get in, but it helps. Winston Churchill, LL.D. '43, and Dwight Eisenhower, LL.D. '46, are among the very few who have wangled an invite. But only one each. When Eisenhower inquired about a second visit on a return trip to Cambridge, he was rebuffed.

The club's English motto is "The Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever," and that tells you pretty much everything you need to know about the interior decorations. The current clubhouse went up on the exact site of the original one—torn down for urban renewal—on the centennial anniversary of the founding, and by all accounts it still looks exactly like a men's club from 1891. The club has its grand marshal ("the Grand") and its deputy grand ("Brother Dep"), but it is run in every practical sense by the club steward, who maintains the air of an imperious English butler. There are no video games, no TV, no Ping-Pong table. There are two ancient billiard tables, but they are little used. "So what do you do?" I asked one P.C. man. "Nothing!" he replied joyously.

In a world of change, the P.C. stands for permanence, and this gives the club much of its charm. One clubman described to me a "delicious Proustian effect" of lying on an ancient couch dubbed the Rockpile, feeling a pain in his side and knowing that Teddy Roosevelt had felt the exact same discomfort that he did. "In fact it's more than Proustian," he went on, "since I'm recalling time lost before I was born."

Inside the hallowed rooms of the old club, time has stopped. The hands on the Tiffany clock—fondly called The Old Bitch—in the large clubroom have been frozen at 1:15 for as long as anyone can remember. There is, by tradition, no time at all inside the club. There is only what is called Outside Time, or O.T. for short. To ask the hour at the Porcellian, consequently, one inquires, "What's the O.T.?"

And, insofar as possible, the P.C. has kept the O.T. out. Time bears nothing away at the Porcellian, nothing of importance anyway. The club is like some alluvial deposit, where things accrue and never seep away—members, events, furniture, traditions. Traditions especially. Peculiar P.C. ways linger on long after the original explanations for them have faded from memory. They are referred to, collectively, as The Custom. At the Porcellian, for example, the correct response to good news is to cry out gleefully, "Never better!" Fair enough, but to bad news, the reply is to boo, "B.A.A.," the acronym of the Boston Athletic Association. "That doesn't make much sense," I observed to the member who confided this fact to me. "Little at the Porcellian Club does," he replied. Champagne—which has traditionally served as something like the club currency since small wagers are usually paid off in bottles of it—is called *George*. Ginger ale is *crew George*. The edge of the carpet by the window is called the *deadline*, since members are not supposed to cross it bearing a drink in their hands. Alumni members are called *honoraries*; undergraduate ones are *immediates*. And so on.

The P.C. is a little mysterious, to be sure. But people tend

to assume that if the Porcellians are such hotshots, and if they operate in such secrecy, they *must* be up to no good, as if the P.C. were a version of the Trilateral Commission. Yet there are other mysteries besides conspiracy, and the common friendship of men lies at the heart of this one. Here, the big mystery—the mumbo-jumbo, the arcane P.C. rituals—is just the P.C.'s way of creating friendship and then exalting it. If at some later point prosperity might stem from the sacred bond, well, so much the better.

Conviviality, good fellowship, camaraderie, call it what you will, the club is centered on it, and every aspect of the club's operation is designed to foster friendship's growth. Election must be unanimous, so that members are liked by all. (The punch-book, with all its potentially embarrassing comments, pro and con, is destroyed at the time of the election; and discussion of past elections is forbidden.) The initiation ritual—said to be rather frightening—convinces the new member that he has crossed a great divide into a new realm of being; it's the Porker equivalent of being born again. And once he is safely installed, the traditions, the code language, the mirror angled down to the street, the pigs—all these are designed to foster harmony by demonstrating privileged in-crowd status.

As a number of Porkers observed to me, there is nothing all that amazing about any of this. The Masons, they point out, have their little quirks too.

Recently, the club's historical interest in secrecy has been reinforced by paranoia as the members contemplate a complaint against the Fly Club brought to the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) by a Harvard law student and former Harvard undergraduate, Lisa Schkolnick '88, with the assistance of Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz. Schkolnick's complaint followed a similar action taken by the City of New York against the Century Club and other all-male clubs in the city, an action upheld by the Supreme Court, and charged that the club illegally discriminates against women. The complaint could spell big trouble for the P.C. if Schkolnick wins, which is fine by Dershowitz. "I'm just as opposed to the Porcellian as to the Fly," he says. "These clubs are the minor leagues for the big league clubs of Boston and New York. They are shortcuts to the centers of commerce and power." Last summer, the MCAD rejected Schkolnick's complaint on the grounds that a Harvard final club is not a public accommodation, but Schkolnick has appealed the ruling.

For now, at least, the Porcellian is carrying on as ever. Grand Marshal James Volney Righter '58 claims that the club has benefited from its rivals' declining standards. "As other clubs become more like fraternities," he says, "ours seems more like a real club by comparison." And he notes that, after its turn toward exotic foreigners, the club has returned to the traditional stock from bygone years—not straight WASPs, actually, but clubbable jocks. This year, half the incoming members are rowers. In these days of enforced sobriety, this is probably just as well. Only a rower could live on crew George at the Porcellian Club. ▽

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