

The Church Club of New York Library

by Jacqueline Rider

ABSTRACT: Organized in 1887 by religious, financial, and social leaders in Manhattan, the Church Club of New York holds a library of some 1,500 volumes. It documents the religious roots and theological framework of New York's financial elite, the birth of the Episcopal Church, and mainline American Protestantism's reaction to the Social Gospel movement in the early 20th century. This essay discusses how titles illustrate the challenges these gentlemen confronted to their roles and their church's identity in a rapidly changing society. Industrialization, modernization, and immigration were all affecting their personal, professional, and spiritual lives. It also reflects on how the collection as a whole mirrors the evolution of one sector of 20th century American culture.

INTRODUCTION

Viewers of the PBS series "Downton Abbey" might recall when Lady Cora's mother, Martha Levinson, visits from America. With homes in New York and Newport, she could very well have been married to someone resembling a member of the Church Club of New York.

In 1905, New York Episcopal layman John Cole described the Church Club of New York as "a club for suggestion."¹ That genteel understatement might also apply to the club's library.

Organized in 1887 by many of the city's religious, financial, and social leaders, the Church Club of New York holds a library of some 1,500 volumes. It documents the religious roots and theological framework of New York's financial elite, the birth of the Episcopal Church, and mainline American Protestantism's reaction to the Social Gospel movement in the early 20th century. Titles illustrate the challenges these gentlemen confronted to their roles and their church's identity in a rapidly changing society. Industrialization, modernization, and immigration were all affecting their personal, professional, and spiritual lives.

Bylaws provided for a library that would hold "only such publications as are germane to the objects of the Club." While most of the collection covers 1800 to 1950, some items date to the mid 1600s. Others are but a few years old. Works examine the theology of money and capitalism, the response of the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion to two world wars, Christianity and Judaism, and New York Episcopal Church involvement in local events.

FOUNDING AND FOUNDERS OF THE CHURCH CLUB OF NEW YORK

The club began when Christ Church parishioner J. Blecker Miller invited a number of churchmen to "consider the advisability of forming a society for the purpose of increasing knowledge of the history and doctrines of the Church, of opposing errors in other religious faiths and in atheism, and of furthering the general interests of the

¹ James Elliott Lindsley, *The Church Club of New York: the First Hundred Years*. New York: The Church Club of New York, 1994, 42.

Jacqueline Rider is a graduate of the dual degree program at the Palmer School of Library and Information Science and New York University with master's degrees in library and information science, rare books concentration, and archives and public history, digital archives concentration. She interned at General Theological Seminary's Christoph Keller, Jr. Library.

Church in this vicinity.”² Bleeker’s five-volume set, J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle, *Geschichte der Italienischen Malerei*. Leipzig: Verlag Von S. Hirzel, 1869, was given to the library in 1932 by Wilmot T. Cox. Cox gave the set, half-bound in dark green leather with green marble boards and gilt spines, in memory of his sister Maria Duane Bleeker Cox, who hosted a gathering to explore the club’s formation at her West 9th Street home in Greenwich Village.

Founding members came from such eminent New York parishes as Trinity, Grace, Calvary, and St. George’s. They were joined later by laymen from St. Thomas, St. James, Heavenly Rest, Holy Trinity, and St. Bartholomew’s.

The Church Club’s membership roster reads like a who’s who of industrial, financial, political, religious, and cultural Knickerbockers, Manhattan’s early aristocracy. It included J.P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, John Jacob Astor, Stuyvesant Fish, E.H. Harriman, and Eugene H. Outerbridge, along with Rockefellers, Roosevelts, Satterlees, and Van Rensselaers, and later on John V. Lindsay and Horace Havemeyer.

New York scion George Zabriskie served as Church Club president 1892-94. A member of the Sons of the American Revolution and president of the New-York Historical Society, Zabriskie was a prominent New York businessman and U.S. Flour and Sugar Administrator during World War I. Several members of the Zabriskie family have held leadership positions in the Episcopal Church, including the Rev. Dr. George Zabriskie Gray, appointed dean of the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1876.

NOTES ON THE COLLECTION, ITS USE AND USERS

George Albert Zabriskie donated many items to the Church Club library, including a 1727 folio, *Missale, romanum ex decreto sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini restitutum*, 33 cm. bound in red velvet with brass furniture and goffered edges.

In contrast to Zabriskie’s opulent *Missale* the library holds several roughly stitched unbound printings of sermons preached before the House of Commons during the early 1600s. Another unique item is ecclesiastical historian George F. Seymour’s personal copy of his 1871 defense against charges made by faculty colleagues at The General Theological Seminary in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan.

The Oxford Anglo-Catholic movement, which arose in England during the early 1800s, was being felt in United States churches and seminaries as well. General’s Dean John Murray Forbes early in his ministry had visited Rome, only to return disillusioned and suspicious of what he perceived as “Romanizing” tendencies. He became critical of Seymour, a supporter of Ritualism, and accused him of circumventing seminary administrators on behalf of students who faced disciplinary actions in 1870. According to former Church Club President, Episcopal Church Historiographer, and General Seminary Professor Dr. Robert Bruce Mullin, charges were made back and forth, and “it became ugly for a while.”

Black leather bound and measuring 24 cm, the Seymour notebook numbers only 86 slim pages. Seymour wrote almost as many notes in his own hand, filling every blank space on all endpapers, front and back. On the front pastedown he wrote:

² Ibid, 7

*This pamphlet is a defence against the charges made against me deliberately and with a full knowledge of what they were doing by the Dean and my colleagues at the time. ... I am not afraid of anything which man can do unto me. Geo. F. Seymour.*³

Other titles, such as the Rev. W. Gresley's *The Present State of the Controversy with Rome*, printed in London in 1855, reflect the Church Club's internal debate over its position on the Oxford Movement, and other shifts within the Anglican Communion. During its second year the club hosted a series of five Lenten lectures on the theme "The History and Teachings of the Episcopal Church as a Basis for the Reunion of Christendom." In his centennial history of the Church Club, James Elliott Lindsley writes,

Imagine this heavy fare on late-winter afternoons in gaslit churches after a generous Sunday dinner. It was a tribute to the audience as well as to the speakers that the lectures were enthusiastically received.

Later, 'nicely printed and bound in red cloth,' the lectures were published and sold for 50 cents each.⁴

The library contains some fine examples of Oxford and Cambridge bindings, including a 1713 octavo format Book of Common Prayer printed by John Baskett in London and bound in black goatskin.

Around the time of the Church Club's founding, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States found itself deep in discussions about the Book of Common Prayer, which had been used since 1789 and closely followed its predecessor, the English Book of Common Prayer from 1662. During the 1800s, the Church's General Conventions approved minor changes to the Prayer Book, with gatherings from 1883 through 1892 focused on major revisions.

The Church Club library contains many Prayer Books dating from the 18th through the 20th centuries printed in England and the United States. Member J.P. Morgan gave to the club a set of seven large, folio format, 1844 facsimile editions of the Book of Common Prayer dated 1549, 1552, 1559, 1604, 1637, 1662, and 1844. William Pickering of London printed each volume on handmade paper, full leather bound. One still bears Morgan's personal bookplate.

The library also holds numerous editions of archives and journal proceedings of General Conventions from the late 1700s through the most recent, as well as a *Journal of the proceedings of the General Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America held in St. Paul's Church Augusta Ga. from Nov. 12 to Nov. 22nd inclusive in the year of our Lord 1862*, half bound in black leather with marble boards and endpapers, and gilt stamped on the spine.

After the Civil War, American expansionism pushed westward and the Episcopal Church's ecumenical efforts followed. The Church Club library holds prayer books in a variety of languages, including Native American dialects from Alaska to the Southwest. Other denominations are also represented in such works as John Wesley's twelve-page *Advice to the people called Methodists* printed in London in 1787 and sold "at the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Preaching-Houses in Town and Country."

This evangelicalism also comes through in 19th and early 20th century hymnals. Though often graced with lavishly gilt stamped bindings, many hymnals were printed on now brittle wood pulp paper typical of that era in book production. In addition to Episcopal Church hymnals, denominations represented include Baptist,

³ *A defence of the professor of ecclesiastical history against the assault of the dean and the other professors of the General Theological Seminary New York.* New York: Styles & Cash, 1871.

⁴ Lindsley, 15.

Congregational, Evangelical Lutheran, Reformed Church in America, as well as collections of spirituals, and Gospel and folk music. A twelfth edition copy of *The Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection of Church Music* edited by Lowell Mason is dated 1832.

Lindsley writes that as the 20th century dawned, Church Club members, “grumbling about the interminable profundity of the annual lectures,” broadened their intellectual horizons to examine “the new aesthetic movement then making itself felt in the Episcopal Church.”⁵ A number of prominent Manhattan architects were Church Club members, including George B. Post, architect of the New York Stock Exchange.

At the same time, wealthy young Americans were following the earlier example of England’s aristocracy and embarking on their own grand tours of Europe. From both of these trends the club acquired many books on religious art and architecture.

An 1822 edition of *Views of the Cathedral Churches of England and Wales with Descriptions* by John Chessell Buckler measures 50 cm with dozens of grandly detailed plates. Later books illustrate cathedrals in France and Italy with color prints of watercolors that capture informal street scenes in dappled pastels. Other titles include *The Romance of our Ancient Churches*, 1899, by Sarah Wilson; *The Medieval Styles of the English Parish Church*, by F.E. Howard, 1936; and *The English Parish Church: an Account of the Chief Building Types & of their Materials During Nine Centuries*, by J. Charles Cox, 1914.

The library owns several lavish pictorial parish histories of famous Manhattan Episcopal churches alongside more modest histories sent from smaller parishes throughout the Anglican Communion. One of the most impressive is *St. Mark’s Church Philadelphia and its Lady Chapel: with an account of its history and treasures*, by rector Alfred Mortimer. Privately printed in 1909 at the DeVinne Press in New York, the book is no. 101 of an edition of 400 copies printed from type on French handmade paper. Bound in dark blue leather, the cover features a deeply detailed blind stamp impression of St. Mark; gilt spine, border and edges; and dark blue silk moire covered endpapers. Full page color and albumen prints illustrate church architecture and artifacts.

Art books in the Church Club library cover a range of topics, such as Emily Sophia Hartshorne’s *Designs for Church Embroidery and Crewelwork from Old Examples*, with a portfolio of eighteen plates containing more than sixty patterns compiled in 1880.

Many designs of the books themselves convey the richness of the book arts. The title page of the 1896 altar book printed by Daniel Berkely Updike at the Merrymount Press is heavy with Kelmscott-style borders of vines and flowers. Geoffrey Keynes’ *X Sermons Preached by that Late Learned and Rev. Divine John Donne* published by the Nonesuch Press in 1923 is arresting in its elegant simplicity. The title page verso reads:

This book has been printed and made in England at the Kynoch Press, Birmingham in the summer of 1923. The type is Garamond and the paper Dutch mould-made. The edition is limited to 725 copies of which this is number 31.

THE CHURCH CLUB’S BROADENING INTERESTS

Lay discussions of the Church in the modern world figure prominently throughout the Club’s history. Holdings reflect that concern, with philosophical pragmatist John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, ecumenist J.H.

⁵ Ibid, 32.

Oldham's *Christianity and the Race Problem*, Charles Lewis Slattery's *The Influence of the Church on Modern Problems*, and Joseph F. Fletcher's *The Church and Industry*. Henry H. Klein gave to the library an autographed copy of his self-published, *Standard Oil or the People: the Cause of Hard Times in America*, in 1914. Was this volume in fact consulted by Church Club members? Its utilitarian paper covers remain in remarkably fine condition almost 100 years later.

The Church Club has grappled with conflict religious and secular, local and global. *The Hill of Vision: a forecast of the great war and of social revolution with the coming of the new race gathered from automatic writings obtained between 1909 and 1912 . . .*, by Frederick Bligh Bond, 1918, was given to the club library by writer and intellectual Henry Goddard Leach. Church Club life member Major John DeWitt Blauvelt gave to the club library a *History of the 107th Infantry U.S.A.* compiled by Gerald F. Jacobson in 1920. The book contains many color maps and plates, including one of the proposed memorial to the 107th infantry for Central Park. Laid in is a Nov. 11, 1922, annual memorial service bulletin from The Brick Presbyterian Church. Ernest Gordon's *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, published in 1962, contains prints of drawings made by U.S. soldiers taken prisoner in World War II.

Initial Church Club meetings were held at 146 Fifth Avenue, near 23rd Street. The club later met throughout Manhattan, from the Bible House to the Chatham Hotel, where members could order afternoon tea. Lindsley writes, however, that "this pleasant innovation" never really caught on with members until alcoholic beverages were introduced.⁶

In 1935 the Church Club moved to the Ambassador Hotel on Park Avenue, and in 1959 to the Plaza, designed by club member Henry J. Hardenbergh. Special events such as the annual dinner were held at the Waldorf Astoria. Waldorf President Lucius Boomer gave to the library inscribed limited edition copies of the 1939 *Unofficial Palace of New York: A Tribute to the Waldorf-Astoria*, edited by Frank Crowninshield, and *The Waldorf-Astoria: a Brief Chronicle of a Unique Institution now Entering its Fifth Decade*, by Henry B. Lent in 1934.

Many signed first edition clergy autobiographies were given to the Church Club library by their authors. Other church clubs from across the country sent their own bound histories to become part of the library in New York.

CONCLUSION

For some unknown reason, the Church Club archives contain no photographs of clubrooms, members, or gatherings. And, while the library houses some titles from the late 20th century and even a few recent publications, the vast majority of books came to the club before World War II. The theological inquiry and enrichment on which the club was founded and that is reflected by many of those titles continues in the club today. But, a way of life and concomitant understanding of faith at work in the world seem to have come to a close much as the ink has faded and the spines have worn on the books themselves.

Did J.P. Morgan repair to the Church Club library often to read the current teachings of his faith? Not likely. But the titles gathered together in this one collection tell almost as much about the spiritual lives of New York's early industrial power brokers as public banking records tell about their financial well being.

⁶ Ibid, 68.

