

Remarks by Miles Young, Warden of New College
at the unveiling of a Blue Plaque to Warden Spooner at 11 Keble Road
on Saturday 19th October 2024

I am holding up the caricature of Dr Spooner by the artist Sir Leslie Ward. This is a *Vanity Fair* caricature, which were given out each week in that magazine, and looked forward to by the readers with considerable excitement. It perhaps locks in our mind our image of Spooner: bent, of small height, short-sighted and white-haired: he was, of course, an albino. It pre-dates his Wardenship by some five years, so he would have been living in this house at the time it was done. The fact that he was featured in *Vanity Fair* at all testifies to his notoriety and certainly contributed to it. The verso, on the back of the caricature, makes reference to his cause of fame, the spoonerism: “the half-warmed fish has risen in his breast; he knows all about Kinquering Congs; his cat has popped on his drawers, he has unwillingly addressed beery wenches; and he will doubtless be grattered and flatified by his appearance in *Vanity Fair*”.

In doing so, *Vanity Fair* perpetuated what would be a continuing aspect of Spooner – the attribution of Spoonerisms to him which he certainly did not utter. Of these, only “Kinquering Congs” can be clearly attested.

To Spooner, the reputation which surrounded his verbal muddles was an embarrassment from which it was difficult to escape. In a very Oxford way, truth should never get in the way of a good story, and there is no doubt that many supposed Spoonerisms were a made-up part of undergraduate chaff. Fortunately, Dr John Potter has made a scientific contribution to the topic in his article, “Dr Spooner and dysgraphia”. As a neurologist, he concluded “it seems possible to me that Spooner’s trouble might be regarded as an essentially motor member of that family of developmental disorders which has developmental dyslexia as its outstanding example.” These troubles were verbal “metaphasis”, but also, as Potter shows, written dysgraphia and transpositions in action “dyspraxia”. The most extreme

of these is when confronted by some salt spilled on the dinner table he poured wine on it to clean it.

The number of spoken and reasonably authentic Spoonerisms where letters or syllables transferred between words was estimated by Sir William Hayter, another predecessor as Warden, in his excellent biography of Spooner as being nine; but there are other looser examples of muddled thought. However, my reading suggests there were a few more than that. Apart from “Kinquering Congs” the Spoonerism is all about someone “occupewing my pie” seems definitely well attested. And I have discovered recently a new one, thanks to our old Member, Lord Willoughby De Broke: his grandfather wrote: “the best of all the Spoonerisms were his own. When Dr Sewell was Warden, two rowdy undergraduates occupied rooms above Mr Spooner. He asked the Warden to shift them to some other part of the College. The Warden did so at the beginning of the new term and Mr Spooner came to thank him, his intention being to say that he now had acquired two reading men called Bell and Hedlam above him. Unfortunately, his mind was so full of the racket he had endured from their predecessors that he transposed the B and H in mentioning their names to the Warden. Spooner is the impersonation of white-haired guilelessness, and Hell and Bedlam must have sounded strange upon his lips”.

Vanity Fair, despite referencing Spoonerisms, was relatively kind to Spooner. Not all the media were. The *Echo*, in its portrait gallery of May 7th 1892, severely distressed Spooner, as his diary attests. He wrote that what “riled” him was that there was a certain “childishness in my character”, which he recognised, and they exposed. However good-natured the banter, let’s be clear that he was being made fun of for what today would be regarded as a disability.

Indeed, Ward’s caricature shows Spooner’s physical characteristics mercilessly. Ward had described in his autobiography his stalking of Spooner thus: “on occasions, a disguise has been necessary for a complete stalk. When I was endeavouring to obtain a glimpse of Dr Spooner... I started by means of masquerading as a student in

cap and gown and as the renowned gentleman's sight was very bad indeed, he was a pretty safe man to tackle. My methods, were, of course, well known to the real undergraduates who aided me to the best of their ability; but on this occasion one student in the front row nearly gave me away. Suddenly turning round in the middle of a lecture he enquired in a loud stage whisper, 'how are you getting on?' 'Hush! He'll see' I remonstrated. 'Oh' explained the other graduate, 'that's alright if he does. I'll tell him you're my guv'nor!'."

In fact, Spooner was no pushover. This is well illustrated by his strange encounter with Oscar Wilde. When Spooner reproved him for being late Wilde replied, "You must excuse me. I have no experience of these pass examinations." This reference to the fact that no marks except "pass" or "fail" were given was so patronising that Spooner told Wilde to copy out the twenty-seventh chapter of Acts. After a time, as Wilde was writing away, Spooner relented and said he had done enough. But Wilde continued to write. Spooner said, "Did you hear me tell you, Mr Wilde, that you needn't write anymore?" "Oh yes, I heard you," Wilde answered, "but I was so interested in what I was copying that I could not leave off. It was all about a man named Paul, who went on a voyage and was caught in a terrible storm, and I was afraid that he would be drowned; but do you know, Mr Spooner, he was saved; and when I found that he was saved, I thought of coming to tell you." Spooner, himself in orders and a nephew of the Archbishop of Canterbury, was as outraged as Wilde could wish. "I was ploughed of course," Wilde informed a friend afterwards. He would have to take "Divers" again.

He was, by nature self-critical to a fault: "I wish I could get from my sermons more power of illustration, and more variety; they are apt to be dull," he wrote. This did not stop him being an avid critic of other sermons. Of contemporary preachers, he judged Litton and Pusey well, Wilberforce and McGee less so, and described the sermon of Archbishop Benson as "claptrap". He was in fact a very good scholar: his biography of Bishop Butler is a significant contribution to eighteenth-century theology and philosophy and stands the test of time.

So, as we unveil the Blue Plaque, let's just not imagine he was simply a frivolous figure. In fact, in the University he was one of the leading proponents of extending the syllabus into science. He served as Chairman of the Council of Lady Margaret Hall, the first women's college. He was a lifelong supporter of Oxford House, the High Church University Settlement in the East End of London, in Bethnal Green. And he was a major force behind the curiously named "Anti-Mendicity Society" – helping the homeless. As he put it, "beggars always appeal to my imagination. They seem to be so much outside the regular social order, to have an unsatisfactory, aimless, hopeless life". But there is always a difference between saying something and doing something about it.

When you return to New College after this event for tea, you will be in one of the rooms – the Tower Room – which was renovated by the Spooners when the Wardenship was taken up. Before then, the Lodgings had been lived in by Warden Sewell for many decades in a bachelor way. But Mrs Spooner, a bishop's daughter, had very clear ideas about the way the Wardenship should be run. There were eleven indoor servants so Spooner employed Caröe, the distinguished Edwardian architect, to do some extensive remodelling with very beneficial effect. The Lodgings provided a venue for their frequent and generous entertaining. It was clear that Spooner had a very sociable side to him; his sympathetic character, and gentle mien, won him many friends. Mrs Spooner was enormously tall, and Warden Spooner was short. Mrs Spooner also disported a beatific expression. This meant they were labelled in College as the "Madonna and Child". Poor Warden Spooner.

Once again, his appearance labelled him rather unfairly.

I have always felt in New College that if I was to invite one of my predecessors to dinner, it would be Warden Spooner. He was a good man, an interesting man, an effective man – recognised as one of the very best Wardens by his successors. As you might have gathered, I am a fan of Warden Spooner, and it gives me great pleasure to see this splendid Blue Plaque in position today.