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CHAPTER I

THE SPIRIT OF THE SOCIETY

When it began, nothing could have been more ordinary than the club known as the Cambridge Apostles. Oratory was one of the principal diversions of student life in early nineteenth-century Cambridge, and when the Cambridge Conversazione Society was founded in 1820 it was quite unremarkable among the many debating and discussion groups of the time. Little is known about its first few years, probably because there is little to know. Its earliest members were fairly nondescript students who seem to have held rather unfashionable opinions for the time and place – Tory in politics, Evangelical in religion. Their nickname, the Apostles, was earned at some unknown time in these years and for some unknown reason, perhaps because membership was limited to twelve, perhaps because the members were led by their religious views to give themselves airs as some sort of spiritual élite. Tradition has it that the nickname was a hostile one, but tradition does not say whether it was given in envy or contempt.[1]

About ten years later the Apostles were not quite so ordinary, for theirs had become the pre-eminent club of its sort at Cambridge. The Apostles of the early eighteen-thirties were exceptionally gifted and promising young men, and their political and religious views were markedly avant-garde. A mystique of superiority had grown up around the club, and its original title had fallen into disuse, except on formal occasions. Its members simply called it 'the Society' (rather as if no other might exist), and they revelled in their nickname. The term gave rise to a half-humorous rhetoric used among themselves, in which they, 'the elect' or 'the brethren', belonged to a spiritual world unknowable to non-Apostles, while the single term 'unApostolic' sufficiently described the sort of person who should never be admitted to the Society. New Apostles were made aware of the honour of their election, and great things were predicted of the Society by its members. Whether or not the earliest Cambridge Apostles were distinguished by spiritual pride, their successors certainly were.

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For all their pretensions, they would not have appeared to most outsiders as anything more than a very successful (and correspondingly self-satisfied) student club of a certain type, one of the several types that existed to satisfy the current taste for rhetoric and disputation. The largest of these clubs was the Cambridge Union Debating Society, formed in 1815 from three rival debating clubs and boasting a well-stocked reading room where members could meet any day after dinner. On Tuesday evenings during term formal debates were held at the Union before audiences of up to two hundred members, and these debates were imitated in a number of smaller subsidiary debating clubs. In essay clubs like the Apostles, on the other hand, students met for informal discussion of papers given by each member in turn, and there were still other discussion clubs that were little more than casual gatherings.

William Makepeace Thackeray belonged to an essay club when he was at Cambridge, one entirely characteristic of the type. It was founded during Thackeray's second year (in October 1829), began with seven members and grew to nine, met on Friday evenings during term, and lasted for only fourteen of these meetings. Thackeray and his friends discussed all sorts of important questions:

Has woman, since the Fall, been the cause of more good or evil to mankind?

Are works of fiction prejudicial to the moral character?

Has the institution of Duelling been of benefit to mankind?

Was the Elizabethan age deservedly called the golden age of English Literature?

The quality of these papers was far from even, and the attendance of some members, including Thackeray, became erratic. Bad feeling grew within the group, and in March 1830 the meetings were adjourned, ostensibly until October but in fact for ever.[2]

Perhaps Thackeray's club was unusually short-lived; others like it survived for several years. But I know of none that even approached the Apostles' record of survival. For most of its known history the Society had fewer than twelve active members. It had little formal organization – a secretary to keep the sketchiest of records, a system of fines for non-attendance, various rules about electing new members. The scope of discussion was quite unrestricted and (unusually for such clubs) even extended to the explosive issues of religious faith and sexual mores. Yet the Society has lasted for over a hundred and fifty years, for much of that time substantially unchanged in format and purpose.[3]

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Although the Society passed through many phases of opinion in its long life, for at least the first century of its existence its meetings resembled those of a small, very informal essay club of the early nineteenth century. On Saturday evenings during term the brethren gathered at the rooms of the member whose turn it was to read a paper. He was usually designated the 'moderator', but it does not appear that he had much to do in restraining disputatiousness. He merely read a short paper, and the members then discussed the subject he had raised or anything else they chose. It seems to have been the custom for each of them to speak in turn, but they could and did say whatever they wanted. Towards the end of the evening a question was formulated and written in the Society's record book; each member signed his name, as agreeing or dissenting or abstaining, and each could add a further written comment if he wished. Something of the range and character of the Society's discussions in its early years may appear from a list of the questions recorded for five consecutive meetings during 1830, when Arthur Hallam was a member:

Has the application of the system of 'The Division of Labour' since the beginning of the reign of George III been beneficial to the country? [Everyone thought it had not.]

Is the practice of Fornication justifiable on principles of expediency? [Only one Apostle thought it was, probably Arthur Buller, who was notorious for his sexual adventures.]

Is the Greek drama founded upon true principles of Art? [Seven members, including Hallam, thought it was, but one did not and one abstained.]

Is suicide under any circumstances justifiable? [Six thought it was not, three thought it was, and two, including Hallam, abstained.]

Are all mankind descended from one stock? [Four thought they were, two abstained, and three, including Hallam, thought they were not.]

In the later years of the Society it became customary to formulate the question in cryptic or facetious terms, but in other respects the meetings of Lytton Strachey's time do not seem to have differed much from those of Arthur Hallam's.[4]

The Society's remarkable longevity was partly due to a distinctive feature of its constitution. When an Apostle resigned from active membership he normally became an honorary member (in later parlance he 'took wings' and became an 'Angel'), but honorary members could attend the weekly meetings if they wished, and the Society held an annual dinner for all Apostles, young and old. From at least the late

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eighteen-twenties certain senior members played a supervisory, paternal role, and there seem to have been times when the survival of the Society at Cambridge was largely due to their efforts. Even more significant were those members who emerged as the Society's spiritual leaders and who, as honorary members, maintained their ascendancy over successive generations of Apostles.

The most important of these spiritual leaders was the first, Frederick Denison Maurice, who was an active member in the mid-twenties. Maurice's influence was enormous, for he and his followers transformed the Society into something quite different from the sort of essay club Thackeray belonged to. It became an instrument of education so greatly valued by those who had experienced its effect that they actively sought to transmit its principles to the Apostles who succeeded them. These principles, known as the spirit of the Society, were the key to its success, and the spiritual leaders who followed Maurice achieved their influence because they embodied this spirit and gave it new life.

The Society's spiritual leaders were not always the same as those who became its leading members because they were most assiduous in their membership. Rather, they were the few who were noteworthy as being most Apostolic. Since it would have been rather unApostolic of them to admit this, they tended to ignore the fact of their leadership and to attribute great significance to the Society itself. But the other Apostles could tell the difference between themselves and the very few who best represented all the Society stood for. 'Sidgwick says that the Society absorbed and dominated him,' wrote Leonard Woolf, 'but that is not quite the end of the story. Throughout its history, every now and again an Apostle has dominated and left his impression, within its spirit and tradition, upon the Society. Sidgwick himself was one of these, and a century ago he dominated the Society, refertilizing and revivifying its spirit and tradition. And what Sidgwick did in the fifties of last century, G. E. Moore was doing when I was elected.'[5]

The tradition that G. E. Moore and Henry Sidgwick inherited from Maurice and Maurice's immediate successor Arthur Hallam is not easily described. But Sidgwick put his finger on two of its most essential components – 'a belief that we *can* learn, and a determination that we *will* learn, from people of the most opposite opinions'. It was with considerable surprise that Sidgwick discovered these Apostolic traits in Edward Talbot, a High Churchman and Oxonian whom he met in later life. '*I* acquired these characteristics,' he noted, 'in the dear old days of the Apostles at Cambridge; I wonder where Talbot acquired them.'[6]

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Sidgwick's surprise was not unjustified, for such a positive and sympathetic approach to other people's beliefs is uncommon, and the Apostles were quite right in thinking that the training the Society afforded was an unusual one. Yet its underlying principles are not difficult to understand, however elusive they may prove in practice. The most important of these principles is the recognition that ideology is a function of personal experience and that opinions are less significant in themselves than the human truth on which they rest. Any thoughtful person is aware that his opinions are not all alike in value. Some of the things we think we believe, especially when we are young, turn out to have been borrowed for the time being, while others express some of the most fundamental principles of our personalities. The problem of deciding what we really believe (and hence who we are) may be particularly acute as we emerge into adulthood, but the task is of course lifelong. It is not likely to be achieved at the level of a mere interchange of opinion with other people, for such exchanges usually demonstrate little more than their relationship to what we conceive to be our present position. A far more useful test of opinions is to explain them in terms that can be shared by someone who thinks quite differently and to accept that his opinions may be based on perceptions as valuable as our own. Not only can we learn more about ourselves from such an interchange, we learn to recognize the valid human needs that may underlie opinions we cannot share. Above all, we learn the difference between conventional or unexamined opinions and those that rest on surer ground.

The training that Apostolic discussions provided gave rise to a characteristically Apostolic view of human personality. 'I fear. . .that he will not be able to make a convert of me to a purer philosophy,' wrote one of the more sceptical of Arthur Hallam's friends, James Spedding, after talking to F. D. Maurice about Maurice's conversion to orthodox Anglicanism. 'I fancy that if I should ever perceive the *dramatic propriety* of his views – their foundation in *his* nature – it ought to satisfy me.' In this view, opinions form the superstructure of personality; they are the visible evidence of an individual's experience and, properly understood, reveal the essential principles of his character. Putting it another way, each individual creates a personal mythology of his own, a distinctive way of viewing the world that results from the interaction of personal character and the circumstances of his upbringing, including the social mythologies to which he is exposed. The Apostles of Hallam's time were of course not alone in thinking that opinion is a product of the organic development of the individual from

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infancy (and by analogy that the beliefs and customs of social groups derive from their distinctive patterns of history), for these were basic tenets of the Romantic movement that they so admired. They were however unusual in translating this idea into a programme for personal growth through the free interchange of opinion.[7]

Since the whole force of conventional and sectarian thinking is powerfully opposed to such thoughtful, patient exploration of why people think what they do, the Apostles felt that they were freeing themselves from the restraints of ordinary social relations, and when the time came to leave Cambridge they often had difficulty adjusting to the outside world. They did their best to prolong the special relationship they enjoyed with one another, although the circumstances of their lives often made this difficult. Quite typical of the pleasure they found in one another's company was William Johnson's delight on having the routine of an Eton schoolmaster's life interrupted by a three-day visit from a fellow-Apostle, in the eighteen-forties. They talked, according to Johnson, for '24 hours nett' and 'went through several hard subjects in the old Cambridge way, in that method of minute comparison of opinions without argument which I believe to be peculiar to the small intellectual aristocracy of Cambridge. So that those three days have lifted me more than six weeks of mere reading.'[8]

The inner world of the Society was vividly recalled in an autobiographical fragment written by Henry Sidgwick, which contains a classic and often-quoted account of the Apostolic spirit. 'I can only describe it,' Sidgwick wrote, 'as the spirit of the pursuit of truth with absolute devotion and unreserve by a group of intimate friends, who were perfectly frank with each other, and indulged in any amount of humorous sarcasm and playful banter, and yet each respects the other, and when he discourses tries to learn from him and see what he sees. Absolute candour was the only duty that the tradition of the society enforced. No consistency was demanded with opinions previously held – truth as we saw it then and there was what he had to embrace and maintain, and there were no propositions so well established that an Apostle had not the right to deny or question, if he did so sincerely and not from mere love of paradox. The gravest subjects were continually debated, but gravity of treatment, as I have said, was not imposed, though sincerity was. In fact it was rather a point of the apostolic mind to understand how much suggestion and instruction may be derived from what is in form a jest – even in dealing with the gravest matters.'

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'I had at first,' Sidgwick went on to say, 'been reluctant to enter this society when I was asked to join it. I thought that a standing weekly engagement for a whole evening would interfere with my work for my two Triposes. But after I had gradually apprehended the spirit as I have described it, it came to seem to me that no part of my life at Cambridge was so real to me as the Saturday evenings on which the apostolic debates were held; and the tie of attachment to the society is much the strongest corporate bond which I have known in life. I think, then, that my admission into this society and the enthusiastic way in which I came to idealise it really determined or revealed that the deepest bent of my nature was towards the life of thought – thought exercised on the central problems of human life.'[9]

Sidgwick does not mention that the Apostolic spirit depended for its effectiveness on the most careful selection of members. The Apostles' methods of recruitment in the late eighteen-twenties have been described by J. M. Kemble, one of the leading members of the Society at that time. 'No one ever knew that he was elected,' Kemble recalled, 'till every actual member was agreed that he should be elected. Temper, moral conduct and good feeling were quite as essential as brilliant acquirements. And at one time, the "Apostles" were by no means distinguished in the University pursuits. One black ball was fatal, and no one ever knew that he was even proposed. We used to make acquaintance with the distinguished men of our time, and if upon that acquaintance, we liked them, and there was a vacancy, we elected them, and then communicated to them the fact. The election was never refused, as far as I know, by any one, when communicated.'[10]

In fact, it was the active members, those in residence at Cambridge, who decided whether a candidate should be elected, although other members might sometimes be consulted. And the Apostles certainly did not insist on 'moral conduct' in any narrow sense, or Kemble himself would not have been elected. Kemble's account may be usefully supplemented by Sir Arthur Helps' memories of the Apostles in the eighteen-thirties, which reveal the extent to which they then sought out specifically Apostolic qualities in prospective candidates:

SIR ARTHUR. The best protest I ever knew made against worldly success was by a small society of young men at college. Their numbers were very few, and their mode of election was the most remarkable I have ever known. The vacancies were exceedingly rare – perhaps one or two in the course of a year – and the utmost care and study were bestowed on

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choosing the new members. Sometimes, months were given to the consideration of a man's claim.

Rank neither told for a man, nor against him. The same with riches, the same with learning, and what is more strange, the same with intellectual gifts of all kinds. The same, too, with goodness; nor even were the qualities that make a man agreeable any sure recommendation of him as a candidate.

MAULEVERER. What did you go by then?

SIR ARTHUR. I really feel a difficulty in describing to you, and yet I know perfectly what it was.

A man to succeed with us must be a real man, and not a 'sham,' as Carlyle would say. . .He was not to talk the talk of any clique; he was not to believe too much in any of his adventitious advantages; neither was he to disbelieve in them – for instance, to affect to be a radical because he was a lord. I confess I have no one word which will convey all that I mean; but I may tell you that, above all things, he was to be open-minded. When we voted for a man, we generally summed up by saying, 'He has an apostolic spirit in him,' and by that we really meant a great deal.[11]

This painstaking self-perpetuation of an élite was highly effective, for the influence of the Society on most of those admitted to its magic circle is undeniable. 'No society ever existed,' claimed Kemble, 'in which more freedom of thought was found, consistent with the most perfect affection between the members; or in which a more complete tolerance of the most opposite opinions prevailed. I shall say nothing of what the actual and former members of that Society have done; but very few of the distinguished Cambridge men of our time have not been members of it; and it existed to remedy a fault of our University education. Its business was to make men study and think on all matters except Mathematics and Classics, *professionally* considered. Its metaphysical tendency has altered (first in Trinity) the system of University examination itself. The affectionate intercourse of that brotherhood, which continues to subsist in all our altered conditions, is the basis upon which some of my most valued friendships have been founded. To my *education* given in that Society, I feel that I owe every power I possess, and the rescuing myself from a ridiculous state of prejudice and prepossessions with which I came armed to Cambridge. From the "Apostles" I, at least, first learned to think as a *free man*.'[12]

The freedom encouraged by the Society has not always been admired. Another Apostle has found Henry Sidgwick's career 'somewhat depressing', for Sidgwick seemed to have been the sort of thinker

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More information

'who so clearly saw all sides that he found it difficult to take any'. And F. D. Maurice's tortuous efforts to accommodate all other forms of thought to his own were often infuriating to those not overwhelmed by the spiritual grandeur of his personality. But these extreme manifestations of the Apostolic spirit did not diminish its value for those who had come under its spell. Faith in the spirit of the Society was almost an article of religion among the Apostles. Some seem to have thought it the key to the reform of society as a whole. Others, more sober, believed it to have acted as a lasting beneficent power over themselves and their fellow-Apostles and, like Sidgwick and Kemble, have attributed the most important part of their education as young men to its influence.[18]

While some people may be irritated by the Apostles' self-congratulatory attitude and their cheerful acceptance of their status as an élite, one cannot deny that the Society has had a very remarkable effect upon some very remarkable people. If its longevity is extraordinary, its membership is even more so. F. D. Maurice, John Sterling, Arthur Hallam and Alfred Tennyson in the eighteen-twenties and thirties; Henry Maine, James FitzJames Stephen and William Harcourt in the forties; Henry Sidgwick, F. J. A. Hort, James Clerk Maxwell, Oscar Browning and G. O. Trevelyan in the fifties; A. J. Balfour, W. K. Clifford and F. W. Maitland in the sixties and seventies; and in the next three decades many names of greater or lesser fame – Walter Raleigh, Goldsworthy Dickinson, A. N. Whitehead, Roger Fry, J. M. E. McTaggart, E. M. Forster, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, G. M. and R. C. Trevelyan, Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf. These are merely the Apostles who tend to be remembered today for their accomplishments in one field or another. There have been many others of great renown in their time, and there are many now.

The Society's later development, however, is difficult to trace, for it is supposed to be secret. For the first three decades of its history the Society's affairs were private, but no attempt was made at secrecy, and people at Cambridge generally knew who the Apostles were. But by the eighteen-fifties the Apostles had become too popular for their own good, and they went underground. In 1855 Henry John Roby was elected and, on being asked to attend the meetings in the usual way, resigned from the Society with the excuse that he really did not have time for such things. Roby, it seems, had only been interested in the prestige of being an Apostle. According to Bertrand Russell, Roby was

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'ritualistically cursed and his name was spelt thenceforth without capitals'. From that time on, Roby's letter of resignation and the curse on him – supposedly devised by the future theologian and biblical scholar F. J. A. Hort – have been more or less solemnly read to each new member, and each has been bound to secrecy. This ceremony has influenced only a few of the Apostles who have reached the memoir-writing stage of life, and a wealth of information about the Society is to be found in such sources. But an air of mystery has surrounded the Apostles ever since. The Society has become legendary: one is not supposed to know whether it still exists nor who its current members may be. Its proceedings, if any, are strictly secret, its records inaccessible to the curious outsider. One can only conclude that there is still something worth hiding and that, in one form or another, the perfectly ordinary essay club of the eighteen-twenties survives as the treasured rites of a modern set at Cambridge, itself the latest in a dynasty of such sets.[14]

It would be interesting to know whether the modern Apostles bear anything like the same relation to the University as their ancestors. In the days of Maurice and Hallam the Society resembled a cult of modernist thought, with radical notions of social change and great contempt for the old-fashioned views of the University authorities. In time, these Apostles had a decisive influence within the University and (even more) in society at large. They became a powerful coterie of considerable importance in the development of Victorian culture, allied to the Establishment, yet persistently liberal in their influence. But they began as rebellious and dissatisfied students, and the development of the Apostolic spirit had much to do with this attitude.

The Apostles were by no means alone in their dislike of the Cambridge system. The system itself contained some of its most dedicated critics, chief among them a small group of liberal dons at Trinity College, who did much to encourage reform within the University. By the early thirties two of the leading figures in this group, Julius Charles Hare and Connop Thirlwall, had established a number of links with the Apostles, and several Apostles came to join the group, as they graduated, won fellowships and succeeded to college appointments. But the liberals were always a minority in the University, and their influence was usually local or indirect. Major changes, when they came, were often the result of government intervention, for the liberals were faced by a tough, durable and powerful tradition.[15]

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