



1953

Nevins and Thomas, Eds.: *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*

John P. Frank

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylj>

Recommended Citation

John P. Frank, *Nevins and Thomas, Eds.: The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, 62 *Yale L.J.* (1953).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylj/vol62/iss7/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Yale Law Journal* by an authorized editor of Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact julian.aiken@yale.edu.

acceptance of the way things are. Nor can he conclusively show that all would have been better had the Jeffersonians not "subverted" the Constitution.

All of this is irrelevant to the worth of his study. History ought to be as accurate as we can make it. If he is half right in his assertions, he has done a great service, for whether we speak good or ill of the dead, we ought to speak the truth about their deeds. And in an ironic way there is a special present value in the shape of things past. Just as the Court may use new light on an old event as an argument for a position to be taken for other reasons, so the events of the past are used as covering arguments for political positions of the present. If Mr. Crosskey is eventually proven right in his assertion that the Jeffersonians distorted the Constitution in the name of states' rights, then those who today argue for states' rights will no longer be able to rely on the Founding Fathers as their allies. (Conversely, those who demand a strong central government will be able for the first time to call upon the Founding Fathers for vindication.) However history is rewritten, some one will still have a partisan use for it. The irony of the Crosskey thesis is that the history used today is used by the very side that created the false history. If we are to bandy about the events of the past, let us at least do it straight and not by a bootstrap doctrine.

Whether Mr. Crosskey is right, in whole or in part, will certainly have to wait on a great deal of research by others. Orthodox historians who have trodden this path once are not likely to be enthusiastic about treading it again even were they to admit that they may have missed something along the way. This means that the new crop of historians, the graduate students now searching for topics for doctoral theses, must be relied upon to do the checking. In all likelihood it will be another decade before we have very much in the way of verification or disproof of these heretical ideas. In the meantime, Mr. Crosskey can rest his case; no judge would dare nonsuit him.

GEORGE D. BRADEN†.

THE DIARY OF GEORGE TEMPLETON STRONG. Nevins and Thomas, eds. New York: Macmillan Co., 1952. 4 vols. \$35.00.

PROFESSOR Nevins describes this work as "the greatest of American diaries and one of the world's great diaries." It is.

The Man:

George Templeton Strong was a New York lawyer, second generation of the firm which today is Cadwalader, Wickersham, and Taft. But his legal career held only a small part of his interest and very little of his heart. A ranking of his enthusiasms, after his family and his social class with which he felt an intense identification, begins with music. Next in line are literature or perhaps Columbia University, or Trinity Church or innumerable charities.

†Member of the Connecticut Bar.

But ahead of every interest, ahead of class, of family, or of self, was an overwhelming emotional commitment to the American union. As for his antipathies, which were many, he named: "With three classes of men I confess myself not in Christian charity: (1) Northern Copperheads of 1861-1865; (2) gentlemen elected to office by the people of this city; (3) organ grinders."¹

George Strong was born in 1820, son of John Strong, a diligent New York lawyer whom George admired intensely. Father and son practiced together for several years. When the father died, the son noted, "I feel like a boy that has lost his way in the street."²

George's early life was luxurious without extravagance. He was encouraged to collect books and coins, not the 19th century equivalent of Indian-head pennies, but money of antiquity: on one good day at the age of 15 he reports "thirty specimens, including one of the Ptolemies."³ Numismatics wore out their interest, but books never did, and he early developed a taste for bindings, printing, and engraving as well as for the substance of his books. At the age of 16 he reported attending a book auction at which a tasteless collection of colored animal pictures was sold. "It was put up at \$2 and was run up to \$5; the auctioneer was just going to knock it down at that price when he chanced to turn to a picture of a goose, colored green, sailing on an ocean colored red, and at this delectable sight, half a dozen voices screamed \$6; \$6½! \$7!! at which last price it was knocked down to a Mr. Darling. Verily, Mr. Darling, Thou art a sap. . . ."⁴

After preliminary education which Strong remembered bitterly for the rest of his life because of its brutality, the boy at the age of 14 went to Columbia. The college had a student body of 100, a faculty of five, and very faint distinction. Upon graduation he read law in his father's office and was soon admitted to practice.

Strong, though in court occasionally, was less a litigating lawyer than a property and probate specialist. His first court room appearance was at the age of 22: "We had a two-and-a-half hour fight, in the course of which I performed the duties of excepting and objecting or apprehending and submitting and suggesting and insisting, in a masterly manner, and at last I proceeded to 'sum up' in a speech, Demostheneian as to eloquence, sledgehammer-like as to force, and twenty minutes as to length."⁵

In 1856, Strong began his sustained service as trustee of Columbia, a duty one-third honor, one-third chore, and one-third tedium. He ignored the honor, balked at the tedium, but did the work unremittingly. Columbia's development was slow, but his persistent and usually far-sighted efforts helped make eventual progress possible. Strong's first great dispute was the losing fight to ap-

1. IV, p. 285.

2. II, p. 227.

3. I, p. 6.

4. I, p. 24.

5. I, p. 179.

point Wolcott Gibbs to a science professorship. Gibbs' eminence was conceded, but an effective bloc of trustees was not yet ready to appoint a Unitarian to a college post, and on this ground alone, Gibbs was not appointed.

The Gibbs fight, with Strong unrelentingly on Gibbs' side, was of extraordinary intellectual importance in Strong's own development. Strong, like the majority of the trustees, was Episcopalian. Trinity Church, of which he was vestryman, concerned him almost as much as Columbia. But for the first time he began to understand the function of a university. It should not be, he concluded, "[a] hospital for decayed churchmen, an institution created to provide salaries and situations for weak-minded, inefficient presbyters with bronchial afflictions that forbid their venturing on a parochial charge, or most estimable and high-minded laymen who can't take care of themselves and must be provided for somewhere. . . ."⁶

Strong's largest contributions to Columbia were an energetic role in the search for good faculty, substantial advice on the management of the school's valuable properties, the development of the Law School, and above all else, the existence and growth of the country's first School of Mines. In the program for expansion of the Law School, Strong had allies. He was quick to appreciate the extraordinary accomplishments of Professor Theodore Dwight, for many years a one-man faculty, and he kept in intimate touch with the progress of the school by sitting annually as an examiner of the graduates. But he was among the first to see that the school was overly dependent on Dwight, and that expansion and development were essential if the school were to survive its remarkable professor. He also helped to establish Francis Lieber in the University and in the Law School, thus exposing the students to one of the most conceited bores, worst teachers, and best intellects in 19th century political thought. Strong saw Lieber's virtue and limitations with remarkable objectivity.

On Christmas Day, 1859, a Christmas tree in the hall of the Strong house had a flag overhead on which Mrs. Strong had inscribed "THE UNION FOREVER." The next eighteen months were to show a need for men who put the Union high, and Strong was an unremitting supporter of the Northern military effort. Lincoln as a nominee seemed to him inadequate—the limited schooling and rail-splitting being advertised as the nominee's chief stock in trade seemed to Strong too little for the situation, and "Honest Abe" he thought no more catchy a slogan than the "Fremont and Jessie" which had proved not enough for the first Republican nominee four years before.

But anyone was an improvement on Buchanan, and Strong voted for Lincoln with at least faint hope for the future. The First Inaugural went a long way to comfort him: "It doesn't run in the ruts of Public Documents, number one to number ten million and one, but deems to introduce one to *a man* and to dispose one to like him."⁷ Thereafter, as a member of the Sanitary Commission, Strong came to know Lincoln, and his enthusiasm for the next four

6. II, p. 151.

7. III, p. 106.

years, though it wavered in moments of irritation and despair, was remarkably constant. Strong's first impressions, after an interview, were mixed: "He [Lincoln] is lank and hard-featured, among the ugliest white men I have seen. Decidedly plebian. Superficially vulgar and a snob. But not essentially. He seems to me clear-headed and sound-hearted, though his laugh is the laugh of a yahoo, with a wrinkling of the nose that suggests affinity with the tapir and other pachyderms; and his grammar is weak."⁸

The first impression grew more favorable with experience. On his next interview Strong reported of Lincoln: "He is a barbarian, Scythian, yahoo, or gorilla, in respect to outward polish (for example, he uses 'humans' as English for *homines*), but a most sensible, straightforward, honest old codger. The best President we have had since old Jackson's time. . . . His evident integrity and simplicity of purpose would compensate for worse grammar than his, and for even more intense provincialism and rusticity."⁹ There were deviations from this attitude; one day he describes Lincoln as good for nothing but telling smutty stories. But usually Strong thought of the President as "Uncle Abe," rich in the qualities of "firmness, honesty, and sagacity."

Strong's first patriotic duty after Fort Sumter was to have a flag run up on Trinity Church, "an unprecedented demonstration, but these are unprecedented times." Four years later his first thought upon hearing of the surrender of Richmond was to have Trinity's chimes set going. These gestures were important to him to a degree hard now to understand; he saw them as exhibiting the solidarity of church, state, and the upper class. In this same spirit, he helped found the Union League Club; he thought it would show France and England that "this war against rebellion is not waged by the rabble of the North, or by its politicians, but that the intelligent, cultivated, gentlemanly class sustains it."¹⁰

But these trifles were no measure of his desire to participate. The bombardment of Sumter in April, 1861, caught the North completely wanting in even a primitive medical program. It was one thing for the first 75,000 volunteers to come at the call of Father Abraham; it was quite another to find a place to put them. The War Department was equally unprepared to care for the healthy or the invalid; typhoid and cholera could decimate the troops before they ever saw Johnny Reb. Within a few months, Strong was to walk in the depths of human misery, to see men "lying on bare hospital floors and perishing of typhoid who could be saved if they had a blanket or a bed, or appropriate good and sufficient stimulants and proper hospital clothing instead of their mud-encrusted uniforms."¹¹ He was to see on even the best of hospital ships, "gaunt, wan, wild faces, restless tossing forms, arms that were ready to strike hard for the country against the country's enemy strapped relentlessly to the fevered body. Great big eyes looking at us with-

8. III, p. 188.

9. III, p. 204.

10. III, p. 322.

11. III, p. 222.

out intelligence. One poor fellow had just died, and lay with unclosed eyes glaring upwards. . . ."¹²

To meet the crisis, to furnish medical supplies and ambulances, to secure hospitals, to nag and improve the medical service, the Sanitary Commission was formed. This private group collected some \$5,000,000 by popular subscription, and its agents were on every battlefield. Almost from the beginning, Strong served as national treasurer.

Happily Strong's law practice permitted of long absences and of pre-occupation, even when at home, with Commission affairs; but for the rest of his life he was to feel an acute financial pinch because, when others had profited, he had served. His checking account was frequently empty, and he had to draw on principal. Though he worried about finances, he was not discontent: "These four years have reduced me to something like pauperism. But I am profoundly thankful for them, nevertheless. They have given me and my wife and my boys a country worth living in and living for, and to be proud of."¹³

During these years Strong devoted progressively more of his time to Columbia, to Trinity, and to music. He attended the opera regularly, and became president of the Philharmonic Society, which gained immensely under his leadership. But his greatest enthusiasm was the Church Music Association, almost entirely his project, which came to produce the outstanding religious music in America. Strong superintended every detail from finances to timing to program planning and even to the execution of particular notes, though always with a modest tact which was his greatest asset. Finally, in 1870, he retired from practice altogether to become Comptroller of Trinity Church, a post which he held until his death in 1875 at the age of 55.

His Mind:

Strong was a moderate conservative, resisting change but not absolutely opposing it. With this conservatism was blended a deep sense of the responsibility of his social class. In the mid-20th Century, the social philosophy of paternalism seems feeble stuff, but in the mid-19th Century it was the dominant device for amelioration of social ills. Strong represents paternalism at its best.

Strong's conservatism expressed itself in a hundred colorful ways. On the Field Code: "I believe I'll emigrate to Typee with my family, live on bread fruit and bananas, and teach the parrots and paraqueets to swear at the New Code of the Supreme Court in every language of which I am master."¹⁴ On women's rights movements: "The strumpets of Leonard and Church Streets are not *much* further below the ideal of womanhood than these loathsome dealers in clack, who seek to change women into garrulous men without

12. III, p. 224.

13. IV, p. 56.

14. I, p. 345.

virility."¹⁵ On women applicants for Columbia Law School: "No woman shall degrade herself by practicing law, in New York especially, if I can save her."¹⁶ On Poe: "an artist in putrefaction."¹⁷ On music he was particularly vigorous. After his first exposure to the Polka: "It's a kind of insane Tartar jig performed to very disagreeable music of an uncivilized manner."¹⁸ "Wagner writes like an 'intoxified' pig," he said, "Berlioz like a tipsy chimpanzee."¹⁹ Verdi he thought unspeakable and Gounod, in *Faust*, "does his best, but he cannot write melodies."²⁰

Yet Darwinism, at first rejected, he came later to accept. That development was critical if he was to sponsor scientific education at Columbia. He loathed the Irish, and was an early convert to Nativism, an anti-Irish political movement in New York in the 1840's. While his anti-Irish sentiments never relaxed, he abandoned racist politics and when Nativism reappeared as Know-Nothingism, he gave the movement no sympathy. The major intellectual development of his life was in his attitude toward slavery. In 1842 he could not decide whether slavery was morally right or wrong. On January 3d, 1863, he recorded: "And be it remembered, with gratitude to the Author of all Good, that on January 1st the Emancipation Proclamation was duly issued. This nation may be sick unto speedy death and past help from this and any other remedy. but if it is, its last great act is one of repentance and restitution."²¹

Though financially middle class, the Strongs were socially top drawer. That social prestige he guarded as a treasure and on occasion used as a weapon. It was to Strong's wife, Ellie, that President Ulysses Grant's wife turned for assistance in facing her first major New York reception. The Strongs were welcome guests at the home of John Astor, though Strong could never reciprocate with plate as fine or wine as costly. The Strongs in turn entertained at receptions for up to 150 at a time, but while teachers, scientists, and some musicians were welcome, social climbers, the nouveau riche, and the merely politically prominent could not get in.

In his own personal relations he regularly used the full force of social ostracism. After the War, at the height of Tweedism, he accepted one invitation to dinner in honor of the New York Court of Appeals, but would go to no more: "I go willingly to no gathering intended to honor such a set of scrubs."²²

Strong reserved some of his strongest language for those business men who, he felt, had failed in their duty. He despised the manufacturer who operated

15. II, p. 129.

16. IV, p. 256.

17. II, p. 260.

18. I, p. 269.

19. IV, p. 116.

20. III, p. 384 (the observation is based on what seems to have been the second American performance).

21. III, p. 286.

22. IV, p. 129.

a poorly constructed plant in which workmen died by fire, or the shipping operators whose boats, he thought, sometimes burned because of profiteering and careless management. He took the deepest satisfaction in welfare work, describing a dinner for needy children thus: "And among them active, busy, sympathizing, and accustomed to such society, were a score of young ladies of the Calvary Church, in their costly furs and silks and wonderful little bonnets, ministering to the hungry crowd. Thank God for the impulse he has given the wealthier classes to seek out and aid the poor."²³

Strong lived up to his own standards. His public service was unobtrusive and effective.

His Book:

This four-volume diary, which for all its bulk is the product of much editing, covers 40 years of Strong's life. It is not, in any narrow sense, a mere journal of personal history. What Strong did and some of what he thought is here, down to the innumerable roast oysters he consumed; but the diary is also a blending of personal experience with a report on the local, national, and international scene. Fernando Wood's elections as Mayor are reported and regretted in some detail, and impressions of the Crimean and Franco-Prussian Wars are recorded. This is a New Yorker's view of the world in the mid-19th Century, a New Yorker particularly interested in the social life of his own class, in crimes and fires, in politics, in music, in literature, and in education.

The very act of keeping the diary was a major labor. It meant sitting up late at night for long entries and endlessly faithful attention. It was done partly for the fun of it, partly with a vague eye to an audience, and doubtless partly from habit. It served as a safety valve for a man who regarded it as his duty to conduct himself with restraint in all public relations. Sometimes Strong consciously thought of potential readers, usually in terms of his children or grand-children going over the manuscript. Even more rarely he had moments of considering himself a modern Pepys.

As a result, this diary of an American in the Victorian age could not be a complete self-revelation. If Strong ever, even for a time, lived the lusty life of a Boswell, there is no record of it here. Explanation of a quarrel with one son which led to permanent separation was apparently written down and then excised from the manuscript by Strong himself. His relations with his wife, Ellie, always reflected great affection and sometimes ponderous good humor ("Mrs. George T. Strong is a very great little woman").²⁴ Perhaps there never was a domestic difference; if there was, the diary has no trace of it. The early diary does reflect some of the doubt and despair of adolescence and young manhood, a melancholia which seems to have disappeared after marriage. Yet as a youth he had incessant "sick headaches" which later came

23. II, p. 200.

24. IV, p. 124.

back to afflict him, and the diary gives no real basis for understanding the emotional tensions which caused them.

This is a lawyer's diary with very little in it on the profession. This is in part because the editors chose to cut out "routine legal material." There is no way of knowing what was omitted, but without doubt, Strong was a lawyer more interested in, for example, religious music, than in his profession. He gave up his practice for the Trinity Comptrollership with no evidence of a real wrench.

Yet there are flashes relating directly to practice, such as a biting description of Chancellor Walworth, "a smart man, certainly smart in the New England sense, and he exhibits his smartness by snubbing lawyers most outrageously. He anticipates their conclusions, mangles their speeches, interrupts their arguments, and annoys them in every way, so that any argument before him becomes merely a conversation between chancellor and lawyer."²⁵

These occasional allusions to practice are just enough to remind that the diarist was a practitioner. There was the ticklish matter of the attachment of an ocean liner by a mortgagee—before default. There was his first argument before the United States Supreme Court in a matter in which the government, as appellant, had raised an intriguing jurisdictional argument in addition to a dull question of the merits. As Strong rose to reply, beginning with the jurisdictional point, the Chief Justice interrupted to say that the Court would decide for him on that point without argument. Strong reported with wry humor, "It was a blow to me, for I had meant to say a great many fine things about Charles I and James II, Dispensing Power, Strafford, Courts of High Commission, centralized despotism, and the like. So I had nothing left to do but prose on a little" on the merits.²⁶ And there is his continuing attention to the affairs of the Columbia Law School.

The most remarkable single feature of the diary is its style. This is a manuscript, prepared over a period of 40 years, and published from its first draft. Yet it is remarkably non-repetitive, both in thought and phrase. Even Holmes could not completely avoid repetition; he "twists the tail on the cosmos" so often that he very nearly tears it off. With Strong, the best shots appear only once.

The book is full of good shots. Because of his great tact in social relations, Strong used the diary to let off accumulated steam. There is a comparison of the style of Chancellor Kent and of the Boston transcendentalists that will not gratify the admirers of either. His first reaction to New Haven was one of enthusiasm for the elms: "if the houses were all carefully removed, New Haven would be a lovely place."²⁷ He wished that the ministers could be relieved of the necessity of delivering sermons, a necessity which meant that "thousands of able, exemplary, and efficient clergymen throughout the country

25. I, p. 106.

26. IV, p. 68.

27. I, p. 278.

. . . become weekly bores and nuisances."²⁸ There is his description of a pompous funeral eulogy: "Vermilye informed the Lord explicitly, by way of preface, of the leading doctrines of Christianity, and then went on to report the special facts of this case."²⁹ There is his recommendation to Bronson Alcott: "If he and the school he belongs to would spend three hours daily in trying to make themselves intelligible to plain people and would sign a pledge to use no words from their polysyllabic technical vocabulary, it would be a useful discipline to them."³⁰

Some of his observations snap. There is a comment on an evening at the opera, which the Strong's left in the middle: "As Ellie wanted to hear the new prima donna (Bosisio or Bossissieri—what matters the name of a woman whose vocation it is to sing such drivel as she sang tonight?). . ."³¹ The parties in an adultery scandal seemed to him so incapable of provoking wild passion that "If this case go to a public trial, it will make adultery ridiculous."³²

But Strong was master of the rounded description as well as the cutting sentence. As a sample, here is his entry after dining with General Winfield Scott. The General, said Strong, is "strong in great things [and] weak in little things. Any man who should listen for half an hour to the General's bad French and flat jokes, his tedious egotisms, his agonizing pedantries of connoisseurship in wine and cookery, his insipid, inflated gallantries, and his painful exhibitions of suspicious sensitive conceit would pronounce him the smallest and feeblest of created men." Yet Strong knows "that he had proved himself a brave, prudent, skillful, brilliant, and humane commander, and a warm-hearted and excellent man. His faults, I suppose, are chiefly vanity, arbitrary disposition, and uncertain temper."³³

This diary is edited by Professor Allan Nevins, Columbia historian, and Milton Halsey Thomas, an archivist and editor. The editing, which took years, is fully worthy of the manuscript. Explanatory notes are spaced through the text. There are sufficient identifying footnotes, and the index to each volume seems flawless. It represents a great contribution by these two men, the staff associated with them, and the Carnegie Foundation and Columbia University, which subsidized some of the mechanical costs of editing. The publisher has done a handsome job, with excellent binding and printing and profuse illustrations. Anyone not intimidated by the size of his journal will find GTS worth knowing.

JOHN P. FRANK†

28. II, p. 46.

29. II, p. 254.

30. II, p. 301.

31. IV, p. 38.

32. IV, p. 317.

33. II, p. 21.

†Associate Professor of Law, Yale Law School.