



## Cambridge Apostles

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The Cambridge Conversazione Society was founded in 1820. Since its original members were twelve evangelical students, it quickly acquired the nickname Apostles. The Society's influence went well beyond Cambridge, and many eminent Victorians, Edwardians, and Georgians belonged to it. For the glbtq cultural legacy, the Apostles are important for their frank discussions of homoeroticism, their interest in Platonic love as a counterdiscourse to Victorian ideology, and their role in establishing Bloomsbury.

### Members

The Apostles include a formidable list of eminent Victorians: George Tomlinson (founding member and Bishop of Gibraltar), J. F. D. Maurice (Christian socialist writer), Erasmus Darwin (physician and brother of Charles Darwin), John Mitchell Kemble (historian), Arthur Hallam (poet), Alfred Tennyson (Poet Laureate), Henry Sidgwick (philosopher), Oscar Browning (classicist), George Lockhart Rives (Assistant Secretary of State and planner of the New York subway), Frederic William Maitland (English law expert), Frederick Pollock (jurisprudence expert), A. J. Balfour (Prime Minister), Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (historian), and J. M. E. McTaggart (philosopher).

Among the twentieth-century notables are Roger Fry (artist), Nathaniel Wedd (classicist), Bertrand Russell (philosopher and recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature), Eddie Marsh (private secretary to Winston Churchill and patron of the arts), G. E. Moore (philosopher), Desmond McCarthy (literary critic), H. O. Meredith (economist), E. M. Forster (novelist), Lytton Strachey (biographer), Leonard Woolf (publisher, novelist, and husband of Virginia Woolf), John Maynard Keynes (economist), James Strachey (editor and translator of Sigmund Freud), Rupert Brooke (poet), Ludwig Wittgenstein (philosopher), Julian Bell (poet), Victor Rothschild (financier), Richard Llewellyn-Davies (architect), Alan Hodgkin (recipient of the Nobel Prize for Medicine), Harry Johnson (economist), Arnold Kettle (Shakespeare expert), Noel Annan (intelligence officer and literary critic), W. G. Runciman (sociologist), John Gross (journalist), and Jonathan Miller (surgeon and theater expert).

In the nineteenth century, the circle was widely influential and particularly powerful in politics (up until the Great War, thirty-four Apostles--or fourteen percent--were Members of Parliament; one even became a member of the U. S. House of Representatives) and the civil service, law and literature, church and education; later it branched out to science, medicine, economics, and technology.

### History

The Cambridge Conversazione Society was founded in 1820. Its original members (mostly from St. John's, although later the Society would draw overwhelmingly on King's College and Trinity College) were twelve Tory evangelical students, hence the nickname Apostles. The secret society flourished until 1914, and it is still intact. Because of its secrecy, however, little is known about its current state.

Initially, the Society developed to meet specific educational needs, providing a forum for discussing modern

ideas, which were resolutely ignored by the University in the early nineteenth century. Thanks in part to the Apostles, the curriculum at Cambridge expanded and became more inclusive. The Brotherhood consistently represented tolerance, open-mindedness, critical thinking, and self-examination, which its members saw as essential in contributing to an individual's sense of identity and personal worth.

Numerous events catapulted the Apostles outside academia and onto the world stage. In 1830-31, several Apostles, in their youthful romanticism and Byronic rebelliousness, became involved in the doomed Spanish Adventure, a failed insurrection of exiled liberals against the throne of King Ferdinand VII, which resulted in the execution of many of the revolutionaries. Several Apostles also rallied to the cause of Irish independence, and a century later, many members fought in the Spanish Civil War against General Franco.

Between 1979 and 1982, several Apostles were exposed as having belonged to a Communist spy ring that flourished from the 1930s to the 1960s. At least four men with access to the top levels of government in Britain were accused of having passed information to the KGB. Guy Burgess, an MI6 officer and secretary to the Deputy Foreign Minister, and Anthony Blunt, an MI5 officer and art adviser to the Queen, were Apostles. Another Apostle, Leo Long, probably was involved as well.

With these revelations, E. M. Forster's Apostolic creed in "Two Cheers for Democracy" (1938), "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country," became suspect to some, who read it as a statement condoning treason rather than a declaration of the supremacy of personal relationships. Even worse, the incident led to such homophobic assessments as that of Richard Deacon: "it was evidence of how the homosexual mafia can operate and how from the earliest times it has tended to be a crypto-protection society in that the bond of friendship has been used to cover up all manner of questionable activities and sometimes even to protect members from being prosecuted."

### **Procedures**

In the early days, election was required to be unanimous. No one knew he was proposed until he was accepted. A new inductee would be made aware of the Society's history and traditions and sign his name in the same book in which all previous members had put their signatures. An Apostle then swore a "curse" or vow of secrecy, and a membership number consecutive with the numbers of all earlier members was awarded at last.

The Apostles met on Saturday evenings after Hall during term, usually in the rooms of a member (the moderator, who placed himself on the hearth-rug) to hear a paper on a topic of his choice, then engage in discussion, and finally take a vote on the essay--all behind closed doors. Immediately afterwards, lots were drawn to select the speaker and an appropriate subject for the following week. Whales (sardines on toast) and coffee were served. They also met annually in London for a dinner to which all living Apostles were invited.

A set of elaborate rules enforced attendance and guaranteed consistency. Fines were imposed for failing to produce a paper as promised. As Peter Allen explains, members sometimes gave a supper in lieu of a paper, and in extraordinary cases, when the moderator was prevented from attending by illness or some other accident, an appropriately serious work was read aloud to those present.

### **Literary Testimonies**

In 1829, to compete for the Chancellor's Prize in English Poetry, Arthur Hallam composed a poem, "Timbuctoo," which testifies to the Apostles' spirit:

Methought I saw a face whose every line  
Wore the pale cast of Thought; a good old man,  
Most eloquent, who spake of things divine.  
Around him youths were gathered, who did scan  
His countenance so grand and mild; and drank  
The sweet, sad tones of Wisdom . . . .

Alfred Tennyson, in *In Memoriam* (1850), describes a visit to the room of his lost friend Hallam and evokes the camaraderie of the Apostles:

I past beside the reverend walls  
In which of old I wore the gown....  
Another name was on the door.  
I linger'd; all within was noise  
Of songs, and clapping hands, and boys  
That crash'd the glass and beat the floor;  
Where once we held debate, a band  
Of youthful friends, on mind and art,  
And labor, and the changing mart,  
And all the framework of the land.

In addition, Arthur Help's *Realmah* (1869) paid tribute to the Society, and G. E. Moore's monumental *Principia Ethica* (1903) carried an acknowledgement to the Apostles. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson's *A Modern Symposium* (1905) is dedicated *fratrum societati fratrum minimus* (Latin for "to the Society of Brothers from the least of the Brothers").

In E. M. Forster's *The Longest Journey* (1907), which bears the dedication *fratribus* ("to the brothers"), the character Ansell is modeled on the Apostle A. R. Ainsworth and the opening scene is cast as a typical meeting of the Apostles. In Forster's *Maurice* (written 1913, published 1971), the "queer" Risley is based on Lytton Strachey and the chaste Clive on H. O. Meredith, whom Forster fell in love with when they were both at Cambridge. Forster's biography of Dickinson (1934) bears the inscription *fratrum societati* ("to the society of brothers").

## **Liberalism**

John Beer quotes two accounts that stress the Apostles' liberalism. Jack Kemble, a contemporary of Tennyson and Hallam, recollected: "No society ever existed in which more freedom of thought was found, consistent with the most perfect affection between the members; or in which a more complete toleration of the most opposite opinion prevailed."

Henry Sidgwick provided the most memorable picture in his memoirs (1906): "I can only describe it 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."

Such an environment obviously proved particularly hospitable to those who desired or needed to speak about what was then considered unspeakable, i.e., the love that then dared not speak its name in the wider society.

## **Homoeroticism**

Homoeroticism flourished in the Conversazione Society for several reasons. First of all, both the university and the Brotherhood provided a homosocial environment (women were not admitted to the Apostles until 1970).

G. E. Moore, for example, felt a revelation upon entering college. His biographer, Paul Levy, quotes Moore's epiphany: "When I came up to Cambridge, I did not know that there would be a single man in Cambridge who fornicated; and, till a year ago, I had no idea that sodomy was ever practised in modern times. My discoveries on these points have naturally brought the subject very much before my mind, and perhaps made me attach an undue importance to it; though I had been long familiar with the extent of the vice in Greece and Rome, and had often read of it merely to indulge my lust."

Second, quite a large number of Apostles felt attracted to other men and formed enduring friendships that may have included physical manifestations. Hallam and Tennyson were perhaps the most celebrated couple.

Richard Dellamora observes that "Tennyson's circle at Cambridge fostered intimacy in ways that might lead to sexual experimentation, even to sexual involvement between members of the same sex. One factor was the group's closeness. Another was a sense of shared superiority that might prompt the view, as it did in a later generation, that members of the Apostles possessed a higher or different morality from that binding ordinary men."

In later days, several Apostles were--openly or secretly--gay: William Cory (who supposedly had an affair with the future Prime Minister Earl of Rosebery), Oscar Browning, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Eddie Marsh, Roden Noel, Nathaniel Wedd, J. M. E. McTaggart, E. M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, to name only the best known ones.

Things came to a climax with the election of Lytton Strachey, who, according to Levy, "altered the character of the Society almost immediately, transmuting its naughty verbal mannerisms and Walt Whitmanesque feelings of comradeship into overt full-blooded--almost aggressive--homosexuality."

Third, secrecy provided a marketplace for the exchange of ideas, and protected candor and confidentiality. In 1831, Hallam presented a paper, "On Cicero," which won the Trinity College prize for the best English essay of the year. At one point, Hallam (unfavorably) compares Cicero to Plato, for the former did not understand "the sublime principle of love" or "this highest and purest manly love" that Plato advocated. Although Hallam's piece focused on the friendship between Cicero and Atticus, the homoerotic undertones are quite striking.

McTaggart, shortly after his election in 1885, read a defense of homosexual love entitled "Violets or Orange Blossom?" (One of the most notorious papers, it disappeared from the Ark, the Apostles' chest where all the records were kept, under mysterious circumstances.) In 1894, Moore read "Achilles or Patroclus," an elaboration on the friendship of one of the most famous homoerotic couples in antiquity. Moore asks "how far in friendship it is necessary that one party should be active (*erastés*) and the other passive (*erómenos*), and what effects on the happiness of each follow from this activity or passivity--in sodomy or otherwise." Moore followed up a month later with an essay entitled "Shall We Delight in Crushing Our Roses?" In this paper, he contrasts conventional morality and same-sex love.

Other treatises touching on the love that dare not speak its name include A. E. A. W. Smyth's "Are Men More Amiable Than Women?" (1899); Forster's proposal on abstinence, "The Bedroom, Brother?" (1904); Lytton Strachey's Apostolic story "The Fruit of the Tree" (1901) and his response to Forster, "Does Absence Make the Heart Grow Fonder?" (1904), in which he elaborated on the "marriage of true minds" between men or women; Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903), which quickly became the bible of romantic same-sex friendships; Rupert Brooke's "Why Not Try The Other Leg?" (1909); and even a consideration of same-sex marriage.

Brooke also founded the Marlowe Society, an undergraduate's dramatic club, named after the author of the Renaissance play about King Edward II and his lover Piers Gaveston. However, in his war sonnet "Peace" (1914), written after he had left Cambridge, Brooke denounced his comrades as "half-men" with "sick hearts" and "dirty songs."

To sum up, homoeroticism never lost its appeal to the Apostles--in good times and bad times. Julie Anne Taddeo contends: "Despite the criminalization of homosexuality and the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde, the Brothers at Cambridge continued to invoke Dorianism, read Walt Whitman's poetry, and engage in a cult of boy worship."

In preparation for his book-length study of the Society, Deacon interviewed an Apostle, who facetiously recalled the 1930s and in doing so turned the accusation that the Apostles were a hotbed of Communist spies on its head: "entry to the Society was much more likely to be through the Homintern than the Comintern. Most preferred Sodom to Moscow and Gomorrah to Leningrad."

### **Platonic Love**

Plato held a commanding presence in the Brotherhood, especially in the Apostles' terminology. An undergraduate considered for election was an "embryo" and his sponsor his "father," and the induction ceremony for a new member was called "birth," similar to the notion of spiritual begetting in the *Symposium*. Moreover, a member who no longer attended a meeting took "wings," a metaphor taken from the allegory of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*. In addition, the Apostles spoke of the cult of a *Higher Sodomy*, and considered male members "real," while women were just "phenomenal."

The world of ancient Greece in general and of the Platonic Eros in particular represented a counterdiscourse to the compulsory heterosexuality of Victorian sexual ideology. Taddeo sums up: "[The] Apostles transformed the definition of 'sodomy' from an illegal and sinful act to an alternative creed of manliness and transcendental love [and] hoped to spread the gospel of the Higher Sodomy among other enlightened contemporaries."

### **Bloomsbury**

Bloomsbury, the name given to a group of friends who lived in or near the London district of Bloomsbury from about 1905 to 1939, included several Apostles: Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Lytton and James Strachey, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Desmond McCarthy, Henry Norton, and Roger Fry. (Other Cambridge alumni who became members of Bloomsbury, such as Thoby Stephen, Duncan Grant, and Clive Bell, never joined the Society.) Though prevented from studying at Cambridge, Virginia Woolf took a keen interest in the Apostles as well.

Bloomsbury--to some an "Intellectual Aristocracy," to its detractors, merely a community of "Bloomsbuggers"--was a modern symposium. Sex and sexuality were frequent topics of conversation and became the basis of many of the ties that bound the members. For example, when Lytton Strachey discovered during a visit to 46 Gordon Square a stain on Vanessa Bell's dress, he asked whether it was "semen." In *Moments of Being* (1976), her posthumously published autobiographical writings, Virginia Woolf remembers the group's reaction: "With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of the good."

W. C. Lubenow has studied the connection in detail: "Like the Apostles, Bloomsbury had no common ideas about art, literature, or politics. Like the Apostles, Bloomsbury was united by friendship. Like the Apostles, nothing mattered to Bloomsbury so long as one was honest. Like the Apostles, Bloomsbury was engaged in a moral adventure. Like the Apostles, Bloomsbury saw through the humbug of family. Like the Apostles,

Bloomsbury was marked by candid discussion in which high seriousness, gossip, gaiety, and argument were all mixed together."

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## About the Author

**Nikolai Endres** received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.

The established facts are these: the Cambridge Apostles (or the Cambridge Conversazione Society) was founded in 1820 as a discussion group. Members were generally drawn from Trinity, King's and St John's, and held weekly meetings (usually on a Saturday evening) during which one member gave a talk on a topic that was not their area of expertise. Cambridge Apostles (Society) -- History, England -- Intellectual life -- 19th century, England -- Intellectual life -- 20th century. Publisher. New York : Farrar Straus & Giroux. The Cambridge Apostles is an intellectual society at the University of Cambridge founded in 1820 by George Tomlinson, a Cambridge student who went on to become the first Bishop of Gibraltar.[1]. The origin of the Apostles' nickname dates from the number, twelve, of their founders. Membership consists largely of undergraduates, though there have been graduate student members, and members who already hold university and college posts.

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