

A Poetic Squabble about Bottle Banks and Skips (1988)

In early 1988 the Warden of New College received the following complaint:

There is a great skip very near,
Atop a city wall.
We see it from our garden plot
And don't approve at all!

We may not know, we cannot tell
Why this we have to bear,
But don't believe it was for us
You put the darned thing there.

"And let there be a bottle bank" –
No doubt your Bursar said it.
Well, it is not a bank to which
Its victims can give credit.

Belloc (a Balliol man) proclaimed
That England's upper class
Enjoys much more than anything
The sound of broken glass.

We do not share that high-born taste:
Our ways are more plebeian.
Continuous crashing makes our house
A stressful place to be in!

Candide, with all illusions shed,
Could cultivate his garden.
Pray grant us peace to do the same!
Don't let your outlook harden!

Don't crown the walls you have preserved
Through centuries of labours
With these two eyesores that distress
Your friendly, harmless neighbours.

Be gracious when you read this please
And help us if you can,
Thus proving, as your Founder said,
That "Manners Makyth Man."¹

These verses were written by the late Tom Braun of Merton College,² on behalf of Vijay Joshi and his family, residing at 98 Holywell Street, one of the houses set along Holywell

¹ All the materials for this note derive from a stapled pile of documents found in the tutorial office and handed to me by the Senior Tutor, Mark Griffith. They will subsequently move to the Archives.

Street and running parallel to the Slype in college. The then Warden, Harvey McGregor, subsequently asked one of the fellows, the late A.D. Nuttall, Fellow and Tutor in English and a sometime Mertonian, to provide a versified response to Merton. Whereas Tom Braun had chosen to parody the hymn of (Mrs) Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895), to the tune written by William Horsley (1774-1858) – Braun ran a fine line in hymn parodies – New College’s response took Alexander Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* as its point of departure:

What dire Offence from clam’rous Glassware springs!
What mighty Contest from unsightly³ Things!

That your complaint is just, I’ll not deny.
A Bottle-bank and Skip scarce please the Eye.
Yet Glass, re-cycled, helps the Gen’ral Good
And therefore stand we still just where we stood.

But, just as foreheads clash, fair Compromise
Descends in mild Effulgence from the Skies.
She whispers in my Ear, “Appoint a Crew,
And move the Bank, till it is hid from View”.

This I shall do – have ordered to be done –
Th’offending Bank no more your Sense will stun,
Nor, I do trust, will Noise your Ears assail;
The Wall will muffle it, with Flint and Shale.
The Skip, at Moments rare, must reappear
But vanish expeditiously, I hear.
Thus to be Neighbours we do surely strive
And thereby Wykeham’s adage keep alive.

These verses were returned to Merton, and indeed at the request of the head of house of Merton⁴ both were subsequently published in the Merton college magazine, *The Postmaster*. New College’s response was signed ‘Custos, St George’s Day 1988’, but as Braun knew and as McGregor freely admitted, the work was mainly that of Nuttall, ‘while I have made a few changes myself hopefully for the better (and with his agreement)’, McGregor explained, including the entire opening couplet and its note.⁵ (Braun and Nuttall, incidentally, were good friends; I recall them together well in the ‘Homer’ (or Virgil or Ovid) reading group held in north Oxford, where I saw in 2004 Nuttall prod Braun awake as it came around to him to translate the next chunk of verse; we were reading Ovid at this point.)

Now we can reveal that Nuttall also supplied some harder talking in verse on the college’s behalf, not in the end taken up by the Warden, but worth preserving, as it shows

² Braun’s occasional writings were published posthumously: *Tomfoolery: Occasional Writings by Thomas Braun* (Chippenham, 2010), where these verses are printed on pp. 62-3.

³ To this couplet was added the note: “‘unconvivial’ would have been poetically preferable but I cannot fit it into the metre without loss of too much else.’

⁴ John Roberts to Harvey McGregor, 4 July 1988: ‘I thought it admirable that Oxford could still do business like this and felt that others would agree with me and would enjoy the exchange, too.’

⁵ As we have Nuttall’s typically spidery autograph with McGregor’s emendations, they are: ‘This I have done – or order’d to be done –’ was changed to ‘This I shall do – have ordered to be done –’; ‘I surmise’ was changed to ‘I do trust’; ‘we sincerely strive’ to ‘we do surely strive’; and ‘As Wykeham’s adage we would keep alive’ to ‘And Wykeham’s adage thereby keep alive.’

that, unsurprisingly, New College also harboured grumpy thoughts that Mertonians camped around our walls can like it or lump it. *This* poem has never been printed:

Indeed our Founder's made us so polite
That we no Word uncivil e'er can write
Therefore we'll never say (what else we might)
"Sell us the house; Mertonians take flight!
Great Wykeham's Brood can occupy the Site
Henceforth let them (that's us) the View endure
Of Bank or Skip alike, Solution sure
Of all our troubles." Perish all such thoughts!
We'll move the bank – and cut this Poem short.

Even though the politer version was all that winged its way back to Merton, all was not well thereafter. For in February of 1989 the Warden was replying to Vijay Joshi again, following a January letter 'raising once again the subject of the bottle bank and skip.' Joshi now enclosed the published poems,⁶ but bewailed that the bottle bank had initially only been moved ten yards to the west – and then moved back again to its initial position! The skip too was still an unwelcome sight 'piled high with rubbish'. Apparently the bottle banks were therefore moved on custodial insistence once again – but 'it is impossible for me constantly to police their precise position', the Warden somewhat exasperatedly added. At this point the surviving correspondence comes to an end, with a promise from the Warden that a 'modular, more attractive looking, bottle bank' was being sought. The skip, I think, is still there today.

As a sometime resident of the Sacher Building for several years, the present writer can confirm that the problem of how to dispose of several dozen glass bottles into a bottle bank early in the morning without disturbing everyone within a certain radius has not yet been satisfactorily resolved, and probably never will. The radical solution, to drink only out of the quieter plastic, or indeed not to drink at all, is unlikely to be widely endorsed.

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⁶ The editor of *The Postmaster* supplied his own note-couplet on Braun's allusion to Belloc: 'But let us not with praise be sparing / He took the thought from Maurice Baring.'