

Fiat Lux

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by Stephen E. Towne

The Fiat Lux was a literary and social circle of prominent white Indianapolis residents—both men and women. They met weekly on Saturday nights at 9pm in the mid-1870s. We know very little about the group. When did it form? Who instigated it? How long did it exist? Who formed the full circle of people who attended? We do not have answers to these questions. The Fiat Lux was simply an Indianapolis social group of affable, like-minded people who enjoyed gathering at regular intervals to talk, laugh, and sing. They intrigue me, and I want to know more about this group and what drew them together. I want to put them and their group into the context of their times. Therefore, this evening we will spend some time getting to know the Fiat Lux.

It is important to point out that the Fiat Lux flourished at about the time this august body, the Indianapolis Literary Club, came into being. The Literary Club began in 1877. It may interest you to know that none of the gentlemen who were active in the Fiat Lux—men of wit, good humor, evidently well-read, and sociable—joined the Literary Club. I will float a theory for this astonishing fact, and, in doing so, focus attention on perhaps the most notable of the members of the Fiat Lux. Could the Fiat Lux have been a competitor to the Literary Club in its earliest days?

First, a point of translation. “*Fiat Lux*” is Latin and means “let light be made.” It appears in Jerome’s translation from the Hebrew of Genesis chapter one, verse three: “dixitque Deus fiat lux et facta est lux,” which is usually translated, roughly, “God said, ‘let there be light,’ and there was light.” As we shall see, in choosing Fiat Lux for the name of their group, members very

cleverly melded two meanings of making light: first, to expose to light or illumine some issue or event for discussion, and second, to joke, jest, make merry, or otherwise have a happy time together; hence, to make light. Members perhaps put greater emphasis on the second attribute than the first. They enjoyed a good time and wished to share their good feelings with their friends.

What we know about the Fiat Lux comes entirely from a set of minutes of their meetings preserved in a small collection of papers of David Turpie held at the Indiana State Library. David Turpie was an attorney and distinguished legislator and United States Senator, and a member of the Fiat Lux. The surviving minutes, written mostly in his hand, date from April 1875 to January 1876. The group met weekly on Saturday nights. We have only scattered minutes from April, May, and December of 1875, and those of January 1, 1876. Thus, the surviving records are very incomplete. Our hardworking Literary Club secretary will be fascinated to learn that the duties of the secretary of the Fiat Lux rotated among the membership every six weeks, so that the burdens of high office were widely shared.

The minutes of the meeting of April 24, 1875 give a good flavor of the gatherings. Allow me to read a portion of them to you:

April 24 1875. The Fiat Lux met at Mr. Charles Talbot's, 540 North Delaware. Present: President McLain, Secretary Sinker [in parentheses] (last appearance of Mr. Sinker as Secretary for the season), Mrs. Sinker, the Host and Hostess, Mr. & Mrs. Jones, Maj. Palmer, Mr. & Mrs. S.A. Buell, Mr. Neald [*sic*], Mr. & Mrs. Wilder, Mr. Turpie. The minutes of the last meeting were read by Maj. Palmer, as secretary pro tempore. Maj. Palmer noted the fact that the last evening had been largely devoted to the discussion of

the Beecher case. But as the Society did not seem to have any very clear notions, as to the persons engaged in it, the points in issue or questions in dispute he took occasion to furnish a full account of all of these things. The history he gave of the affair was quite good. The names of the principle actors and actresses were miscellaneously mixed and confused; the gushing sentimentalities of the Mammoth scandal and its phrases now grown familiar to the public such as “ragged edge,[“ “] true inwardness,[“] and “I wish I were dead” were worked in with great effect. It was and[sic] admirable Burlesque of the Great Farce; it reminded one very much in its reversal of names and places of the old questions debated in a Rural Lyceum. “Which is the most aggravating: a scolding chimney or a smoky wife,” or of one of A[rtemas] Ward’s immutable Proverbs, “A rolling stone gathers no beggars on Horseback.”

Here we see that the minutes of the Fiat Lux were intended not as a record of previous meetings; instead, they formed part of a comedic performance, an opportunity for the secretary to wise-crack in review. Reading funny minutes added to the atmosphere of lightheartedness and gaiety.

Members of the Literary Club may have recognized the reference to the “Beecher case” mentioned in the minutes. The “Beecher case” was one of the most sensational sex scandals of nineteenth-century America. It involved Henry Ward Beecher, who in 1875 was the famous pastor of the Plymouth Church of Brooklyn, New York, but who in the 1840s had been pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church here in Indianapolis. A brilliant writer and speaker on a variety of topics including women’s suffrage and the anti-slavery movement, and a proponent of evolutionary theory, his sermons in New York attracted thousands. But when one of his parishioners and closest friends, Theodore Tilton, became jealous of the emotional and spiritual

intimacy between his wife and Beecher and filed suit for adultery, the trial attracted international attention. American newspapers devoted endless columns to recounting the minutest details of the case. Pundits of the day used the trial as a foil to attack this or that political, social, or cultural movement. Major Palmer, the Fiat Lux secretary, no doubt expressed the tired exasperation felt by the others at the ubiquity of the “Mammoth scandal’s” press coverage.

The minutes continued. One of the gentlemen present, Salmon A. Buell, an attorney, read an essay by the early-nineteenth century English literary critic, William Hazlitt, on the philosophy of laughter. Members of the group offered commentary during his reading. When Mr. Buell read Hazlitt’s aphorism, “Women laugh at their lovers,” the secretary recorded, “At the close of this sentence Mr. Neald drew a very long breath and said, “I never knew that before,” a solemn gloom overspread his countenance, which was not dispelled until the Kind Hostess announced Cakes and Coffee. He did then seem to revive and our friends think there are strong hopes of his ultimate recovery.”

I think we see here an instance where the group could gently mock or rib Mr. Neeld, the sole bachelor present. Were they all aware that he was an unsuccessful lover? Had he recently been jilted? We will never know, but the kindness in the joke is evident.

Following the reading, Mr. Buell announced that he wished to test Hazlitt’s theory of involuntary laughter with a laughing school. Sitting in a circle, each person said “ha,” starting with one “ha” and adding to the number each time it went round. To quote the minutes: the “Lesson ended in peals of laughter all round,” and the “school was pronounced a success.” A whistling exercise produced similar hilarity. Next, Senator David Turpie read an original essay, after which Mrs. Buell, one of the ladies present, played several songs at the piano. The minutes

record that she played “with great tact and brilliancy.” She then accompanied one of the gentlemen in a humorous song, followed by more banter and wit. The gathering broke up at 11 pm.

The following week the Fiat Lux met at the Turpie home at 173 North Tennessee Street, today called Capitol Avenue. According to the minutes, the evening mainly featured gentlemen reciting poetry. Mr. Turpie, the new secretary, reviewed the performances and commended the readings. He then discoursed in his minutes at length on prevailing fashions of poetry recitation and the need scrupulously to follow punctuation and rhythms. He recounted hearing “a Minister read a beautiful hymn from the pulpit in a Hop Skip and Jump fashion which made it impossible to determine whether the hymn read was poetry or prose run mad. Rhymed poetry,” he opined, “is written for the ear as much for the eye.” Later, in a lighter tone, his minutes record a whimsical discussion on the relative healthful merits of potatoes versus sweet potatoes. Turpie’s minutes run on with observations about literature and the performance of literary readings. He took the opportunity to pronounce that the secretary served as critic and censor of the club as well as its historian. But, he added, “this writer has thus to remark that he never has met with a society where there was so little to condemn, so much to commend, and such a genial and graceful recognition of everything which approached merit.”

Such seems to have been the pattern of the Fiat Lux’s gatherings. It appears that the gentlemen dominated proceedings by reciting poems, reading essays, or starting the antics. Their repertory came from popular writers such as the German poet Heinrich Schiller, the Americans John Greenleaf Whittier and Edgar Allen Poe, the humorous English poet Thomas Hood, the art critic John Ruskin, and the essayist and playwright Sir Richard Steele. Aside from Mrs. Buell’s or a Miss Wilder’s efforts at the keyboard, the ladies primarily formed an audience for the

gentlemen's displays of wit and humor. The minutes show that the ladies occasionally chimed in with their own comments and witticisms, but the men took the lead. The gathering on December 19 offers the exception which perhaps proves the rule. That evening, one of the ladies present, Mrs. Elizabeth Hildebrand, offered a carefully prepared essay written as a rejoinder to Charles Talbott's no doubt humorously pompous inaugural address as the club's new president.

According to the minutes, again written by David Turpie, "The reply was...decorated with three enormous red wax seals and had the appearance of a very important official document, which indeed it was." "The whole," Turpie declared,

was conceived in excellent taste; and was much enjoyed by all present and by none more than the gentleman whose production was the subject of notice. The effect was heightened by the air of mock severity and half earnest seriousness with which it was delivered. Mrs. H. has heretofore been, what might be, not invidiously called a "silent sister", she has been inclined to hide her light under a Bushel; but we hope in future she sets it upon a candlestick that it may lighten the whole club; and that she will take a more prominent part in our proceedings."

Unfortunately, we hear no more of Mrs. Hildebrand's essays in gentle mockery. We can only speculate that over time she overcame her shyness to take a larger role in club activities. Census records show that she and her husband, Jacob Hildebrand, a wholesale hardware dealer, were immigrants from Bavaria. Her initial temerity may have been due to not being a native English speaker. Whatever the case, there is no question that for the most part the men led the way in the club while the women were mostly passive listeners who supervised refreshments.

It is interesting to view the *Fiat Lux* in the context of the rise of different associational groups in the United States in the nineteenth century. At this time, women were forming associations and clubs as vehicles for intellectual growth and expression. Along with seizing opportunities to get out of the house and meet friends, women gathered to exercise their minds, forming groups to express literary or artistic interests. The growing American middle class afforded expanding intellectual opportunities to women, offering more and better education to its daughters. As a consequence, women's sphere began to push into the public sphere and women began to assert a greater role outside of the home. Historians point out that at first women became active participants in charitable or reform movements. Later, from their position as guardians of public morality, women pushed into more political affairs. For example, the WCTU, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, was formed in 1874 to push legislation to curb the evils caused by the sale of alcoholic beverages. After the Civil War and the granting to African-American men the right to vote, some women began to press for women's suffrage. In short, women increasingly moved out of their private spheres as keepers of hearth and family and into the world.

Here in Indianapolis, the Indianapolis Women's Club, formed in February 1875, fits this pattern of development. Its constitution noted that the Club was to be "an organized center for the mental and social culture of its members...for the improvement of domestic life." Like the Literary Club, members presented papers to the group. Many early members of the Women's Club took part in suffrage and other reform movements in Indiana and the nation. Note, however, that last phrase: "for the improvement of domestic life." This suggests to me that the women who wrote their Constitution did not intend the Club to threaten members' relations with their menfolk. A happy, educated, socially active and engaged woman would, they suggested, be

better to have running the household than a woman who was trapped in her domestic role and frustrated by her lack of intellectual outlets. The issue is reminiscent of the goofy rural lyceum debate question recorded in the Fiat Lux minutes: “Which is the most aggravating: a scolding chimney or a smoky wife?” It is possible that the men of the Fiat Lux wished to avoid having a frustrated and unhappy spouse around the house. The participation of both men and women in the Fiat Lux may be evidence that the gentlemen encouraged their wives and daughters to expand their social and intellectual activities.

As I have noted, what we know about the Fiat Lux comes from a small cache of minutes preserved in the papers of David Turpie. Turpie served in a variety of elected and appointed offices over many decades, most notably serving multiple terms in the United States Senate. However, he has generally been overshadowed by his more famous contemporaries Oliver P. Morton, Thomas A. Hendricks, and Benjamin Harrison, political leaders who put their stamp on Indiana and national affairs. Turpie did not command his party in the ways that the other politicians did. His service in the Senate occurred when his party, the Democrats, mostly were in the minority, affording him fewer leadership opportunities. Who was he?

David Turpie was born in Hamilton County, Ohio, near Cincinnati, in 1828. His father bought land from the federal land office at Crawfordsville and when David was a young boy the family moved to frontier Carroll County, Indiana. His father cleared part of the land and farmed it, building a log cabin near the bank of one of the many streams in Indiana named Sugar Creek. In his memoirs, *Sketches of My Own Times*, published in 1903, Turpie lovingly describes the cabin, the nearby garden, and the forest that surrounded his childhood home. Indeed, in melancholy tones, he laments that settlers labored to “destroy” the forest, which was “the dominant physical phenomenon of our lives.” His description of life in rural Indiana is

illuminating. The rural people, he says, did not pay attention to holidays like Christmas or New Year unless they fell on a Sunday, which was strictly a day of prayer and rest. Only town folks celebrated Independence Day. Country peoples' cabins and farms appeared dilapidated; "their external appearance and surroundings were merely the effect of careless and contented indifference." For example, their neighbor, he writes, "was a good farmer, but cared only to raise enough produce for his own use." He continues:

Men did not work for wages but for help in turn. All rejoiced together over an abundant crop, not from any consideration of its market value, but because this gave them assurance of seed for the next sowing, and of bread for the coming year.

In these passages, Turpie describes a communalistic economy of small, subsistence farmers who were not interested in producing surpluses for the market. These people, he writes, yearned for a "free and open life" on the frontier unencumbered by the so-called "progress" found in towns.

In winter months as a boy, Turpie went to a school located four to five miles away from the cabin. During the rest of the year, his mother taught him and his siblings the rudiments of reading and other subjects. Turpie had rare advantages over most of the children of his era. His parents valued education, and his father owned a large library of thirty books! After a few years of country life, his family moved to Lafayette in order to furnish the children better educations in town schools. In time, he went off to Kenyon College in Ohio, graduating in 1848. Returning to Indiana, he taught school and clerked in the law office of Daniel D. Pratt, who himself later became a United States Senator. He began to practice law up in White County. In keeping with his rural upbringing, he became a Democrat and was elected to the state house of representatives in 1852 on his first try, and later in the decade served as a county judge. In 1860, he ran for

lieutenant governor on the ticket with Thomas A. Hendricks, being bested by Henry S. Lane and Oliver P. Morton. After a brief enlistment in an Indiana infantry regiment during the Civil War, he ran for Congress three times against Schuyler Colfax, losing each time. Between those attempts, however, in 1863 the Democratically-controlled General Assembly selected Turpie to serve the last three months of disgraced Senator Jesse Bright's term.

After serving in Washington during part of the rebellion, Turpie returned to practicing law. He moved to Indianapolis in 1872, and was nominated to run for the state House of Representatives in 1874. In his memoirs, he explains that he had not sought nomination, but declares that no man should refuse the honor of the people's selection. Victorious, the majority Democrats made him Speaker of the House. He later served as U.S. attorney for Indiana during the first Cleveland administration. In 1887, the Democratic majority in the General Assembly selected him to be U.S. Senator and repeated it in 1893. He served two complete six-year terms until 1899, when legislators chose someone else. He returned to Indianapolis to practice law and write. He died in 1909.

In his memoirs, Turpie has nothing bad to say about anyone. His praises fall primarily on fellow Democrats like Joseph E. McDonald and Tom Hendricks. But he also commends Whigs and Republicans such as Colfax, Lane, and Morton, and gushes over Cushman K. Davis of Minnesota, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on which Turpie served for several years. In his reminiscences, he wanders over many topics that interested him; indeed, his digressions form the best parts of his story. He describes his boyhood environment, the joys of boarding with the families of the children he taught, the lost art of good handwriting, and gives his opinion on the art of reading aloud. Allow me to quote to you his thoughts on the last subject:

To read aloud well is a fine accomplishment; to read aloud in public with the highest degree of excellence is an acquirement much rarer than singing or speaking, so uncommon that I can number on the fingers of one hand all the readers of that quality whom I have heard during a long life. Faults in reading are shown in our courts, churches and other public assemblies, in manifold instances—faults acquired and tolerated in school, and seldom in after life amended.

Judging from Turpie's Fiat Lux minutes from 1875 criticizing a pastor's poor reading from the pulpit, to his comments from 1903, it appears that bad public reading was a life-long pet peeve.

From what we can see, Senator David Turpie would have been a splendid member of the Indianapolis Literary Club. Well-read, public-spirited, full of good wishes for everyone, his contributions to the Club would have been notable. Why did he not join? Men he knew and admired like Thomas Hendricks and Benjamin Harrison were members. Could it be that the topics of the papers presented to the Club had a rather serious caste? Glancing over the exercises of the Club's first year, 1877-1878, some of the topics appear heavy and dark: "The Relation of Teleology to Medicine," "Cremation," "The Physiology of Belief," and "The Present Crisis in Turkey." Then again, some other papers had light-sounding titles: "Spring-time of Life," or "The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet," or one simply called "George Bush." Hendricks and Harrison and the rest were serious men interested in serious issues. We have seen that David Turpie enjoyed light-hearted entertainments. Could it be that he preferred his evenings to be diversions from the weighty affairs of the day?

In the nineteenth century, American men joined fraternal organizations and clubs to get out of the house and hang out with the fellas. In the clubhouse, lodge, or hall, men could smoke,

drink, spit, and scratch, manly occupations frowned on by female society. There was considerable gender separation.

Instead, Senator Turpie appears to have enjoyed light diversions and fellowship with a mixed crowd of both men AND women. In this light, it is important to note that after he had been a widower for many years, in 1873 he married a young Indianapolis woman. Is it possible that he wished to spend his evenings in the company of his charming wife?

I wish to read to you parts of a poem drafted by Senator Turpie on Saturday, New-Year's Day, January 1, 1876, as found in the minutes for that evening's gathering of the Fiat Lux. But first, to set the scene, let me read Literary Club member Booth Tarkington's delightful description of New Year's Day festivities in Indianapolis in the 1870s found in his novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*:

The women gathered to "assist" the hostesses who kept "Open House"; and the carefree men, dandified and perfumed, went about in sleighs, or in carriages and ponderous "hacks," going from Open House to Open House, leaving fantastic cards in fancy baskets as they entered each doorway, and emerging a little later, more carefree than ever, if the punch had been to their liking. It always was, and, as the afternoon wore on, pedestrians saw great gesturing and waving of skin-tight lemon gloves, while ruinous fragments of song were dropped behind as the carriages rolled up and down the streets.

With Tarkington's vivid picture in your minds, let us hear parts of Senator Turpie's New Year's Day poem:

In seventy-six as Sages say

Thus Dawns a bright centennial day

When Uncle Sam may count I trow
One Hundred wrinkles on his brow
the [noble] theme for them who choose
Fit subject for the ambitious Muse

...

A Lady sat in her easy chair
In a spacious mansion on Delaware
She rubbed her eyes and tangled her hair
“Well of all the bores, I do declare
These New Year calls I wish they were o’er
But hush! There’s another sharp ring at the Door.”

There stood outside a Palmer gray
Pale with the [festivities?] of the day
For beads he wore a bright Boquet.
For staff he held his hat in hand
Twas new except crown rim and band.
“Come in, come in,” the Lady cried.

The pilgrim Palmer glad complied.
“Pray take a chair, where have you been?
What have you heard what have you seen?
What have you said, what have you done?
Is anything lost, is anything won?
Is there anything new that is under the sun?”

“This New Year’s day is grown old,”
The Palmer thus his story told.

“Madam, I’ve made the rounds to day
 I tried to be cheerful happy and gay
 I’ve coffeed till I have a cough
 Of ale and eggnog I’ve taken enough
 Of turkey I’ve eaten terrible work
 So much I feel very much like a Turk
 ...

“The truth is lady you must know
 Every Saturday night I wished to go
 By a vow long standing to worship where
 A goody company repair
 Far from the world and cares malign
 The muses and the graces shine.
 Every Saturday night year after year
 I’ve kept my vow, my conscious clear
 And unless I do I verily think
 I cannot sleep the night a wink.”

The poem, or attempt at one, continues in this vein for some while, most of it illegible. Nonetheless, it helps us form a clear picture. My mind sees Senator Turpie as one of those slightly inebriated New Year’s Day callers, who went home and attempted to write down his happiness in a silly poem to recite to his friends that evening. Turpie was a man who enjoyed the Fiat Lux, an assembly that offered light-hearted diversions graced by charming ladies of education and taste who participated in the festivities. Was he recruited to join the Literary

Club? I have no doubt that he was, and that he turned us down. Gentlemen, we let a good one slip through our fingers.