

F. J. Furnivall. Philanthropist, Lexicographer, Oarsman.

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The river Thames runs like a thread through *News from Nowhere*. Morris would still recognise the Thames at Hammersmith although “the soap works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer’s works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering came down the west wind from Thorneycroft’s.” (Chapter II) The ‘ugly’ bridge is still there, though which suspension bridge Morris refers to is in doubt, for Clark’s classical bridge came down, and Bazalgette’s High Victorian bridge replaced it, just as *News* was written. Taste has changed, and we should miss the bridge, which enjoyed its centenary in 1989. The river is probably cleaner. We miss the commercial traffic with sailing barges, steam tugs and lighters, but Morris would have been glad to see them go.

He might have been pleased above all else to see the river used for recreation, and particularly rowing, now no longer a rich man’s sport but open to all, and particularly the number of women’s sculls and crews. For this Dr. F.J. Furnivall deserves much of the credit. Frederick James Furnivall was born at Egham, Surrey on February 4th 1825. His father was the local surgeon, quite prosperous, with a good practice, a private lunatic asylum, and a small farm. Furnivall went to schools at Englefield Green, at Turnham Green and Hanwell, and matriculated at University College, London. He went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, intending to make law his profession.

He spent his holidays at home, helping on the farm and sculling on the Thames in a heavy fourteen-foot dinghy belonging to a local fisherman. This was the start of a lifelong enthusiasm. He rowed in the Trinity Hall eight, and helped to take it to eleventh place in the University, a good performance for a small college. During the long vacation of 1845 Furnivall remained at Cambridge building himself a single-sculling boat. It was while he was thus engaged that he carried out his experiment, making his “wager boat” narrower in the beam and thus considerably lighter, and putting the rowlocks on outriggers to gain the necessary leverage for his sculls. At first this revolutionary idea was considered unfair by oarsmen, but his example was soon widely copied and became the standard pattern for racing craft.

Furnivall had early shown a strong social conscience. He taught in the Egham Sunday School and founded a branch of the Church Missionary Society at Trinity Hall. He came down from Cambridge in 1846 to read for the bar in Lincoln’s Inn. He went into Bellenden Ker’s chambers, where he met the social reformer John Malcolm Ludlow, while Frederick Denison Maurice, later Principal of the Working Men’s College was chaplain to Lincoln’s Inn. Ludlow took Furnivall district-visiting in the slums of London. Under Ludlow’s influence Furnivall bought the premises for and equipped the Little Ormond Yard school, teaching children by day and working men in the evenings.

Furnivall had brought his boats with him and rowed whenever he could on the Thames. His attention was directed to the plight of the Thameside ballast heavers and “the degrading and destructive tyranny of the riverside publicans.” He enlisted Disraeli’s help, and the ballast trade was put under the direction and care of Trinity House. Furnivall also taught at the Working Men’s Association in Castle Street East. From the Association grew the Working Men’s College, which opened in Red Lion Square, Holborn, and quite close to Ormond Street and Ormond Yard, on October 26th, 1854, with Maurice as Principal. Here Furnivall taught English Grammar and Literature, and Ruskin, who became a close personal friend, Rossetti and Lowes Dickinson taught Drawing. It was here that Burne-Jones came to try to meet Rossetti: “I was two and twenty and had never met a painter in my life... of all men on earth the one I wanted to see was Rossetti.” Over tea and thick bread at an open evening Furnivall introduced himself to Burne-Jones and asked him who he was and what he wanted. The upshot was that Burne-Jones was introduced to Vernon Lushington, who invited Burne-Jones to come to his rooms to meet Rossetti a few nights later. So began the Rossetti/Burne-Jones/Morris friendship, with such momentous results for all three.

Here it must be said that in spite of common aims, common interests and common acquaintances, a close friendship did not develop between Morris and Furnivall. The two men were incompatible. Furnivall was a lifelong teetotaller and non-smoker, and for many years a vegetarian, habits of which Morris strongly disapproved. Furnivall was an active philanthropist but never a political thinker. He knew and was influenced by Charles Kingsley, Harriet Martineau and Thomas Carlyle, whom he got to know through John Ruskin. He became a close friend of Ruskin and the Ruskin family, and remained a lifelong disciple of Ruskin except in the question of railways, which Furnivall saw as a liberating force for working men and women.

Furnivall put women’s rights in work, education and suffrage first and foremost in his life. In his attempts to make the Working Men’s College accept women students and members he jumped the gun. He seems to have tried to force the issue by holding mixed social events and meetings and giving accounts to the press implying that they were official. Maurice objected to this high-handed behaviour – characteristic, it must be said of Furnivall – and threatened to resign. Matters were patched up, and Furnivall continued his association with the College until its move and after. When the foundation stone of the new building at Mornington Crescent (carved incidentally by Eric Gill) was laid by the then Prince and Princess of Wales in 1905, Furnivall was on the platform and waylaid the royal couple with a report of his Hammersmith Sculling Club.

Furnivall joined the Philological Society in 1847. He quickly became one of the two honorary secretaries, and then sole honorary secretary for life. In later years he claimed that he was never interested in philology as such, but was led to it by “a desire to illustrate the social condition of the English people in the past.” The Society was accumulating lexicographic data in an *ad hoc* manner when in 1858 it undertook to use its material to supplement the still standard Dictionaries of Johnson and Richardson. As secretary, Furnivall was heavily engaged in the project. After a year passed it occurred to him that the three dictionaries should be amalgamated into one revised and updated work. The problem was to find a publisher for such a massive undertaking, but eventually the University Press at Oxford agreed to take it up and the Oxford Dictionary series was born.

Furnivall's interest in the social conditions of the Middle Ages led him to found the Early English Text Society in 1864, to which his most substantial contribution was the six-text edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. As if this was not enough, he founded the Ballad Society in 1864, then the New Shakspeare (sic – Furnivall insisted on the spelling) Society and the Browning Society, and lastly the Wycliff Society in 1881. With Furnivall's guidance and active participation, new standards of editing and exegesis were applied to Early English texts, with an expertise that had been hitherto reserved for ancient and classical studies.

Furnivall continued to row whenever he could. The Working Men's College had successive clubs of which he was founder and president. He was Vice-President of the Polytechnic (Regent Street) Rowing Club. He fought a battle with the Amateur Rowing Association over its limiting membership to non-manual workers, and founded the alternative National Amateur Rowing Association.

He also fought a long battle over rowing versus sculling. To those, who like myself, cannot see the difference, it must be pointed out that rowing is with a single oar, and sculling with a pair of lighter blades or sculls. Furnivall was convinced, and tried to convince others, that sculling must be superior to rowing. Perhaps, more importantly, he held that balancing two lighter blades did more for fitness than managing a single oar, particularly for women. So he founded the Hammersmith Sculling Club for Girls in 1896. At first it was exclusive to women, but, having made his point in getting the Club accepted and active, he admitted men as members. He found the premises, an old public house on Lower Mall, downstream from Kelmscott House, and paid the annual rent himself. He bought a rowing eight from New College, Oxford, and had it converted into a sculling eight. This, with its crew of girls and the venerable-looking Furnivall as its cox, caused a sensation on the river. The recommended dress for *his* girls – he was very possessive about them – was a blue serge skirt, loose white blouse and a plain sailor hat.

He rowed regularly every Sunday from Hammersmith to Richmond and back, a distance of fourteen miles, until within a month or so of his death. When upstream above Teddington he always made it a point of honour to be first out of a lock, no matter how far back he was in getting in. He always wore a pink ribbon Leander Club necktie. He was a great courter of publicity for his causes and a great buttonholer. He was a hopeless club chairman, letting everyone speak at once and forever if they were in agreement with him, and silencing those who weren't. He liked public speaking and was at his best when declaiming against the three great evils of English society as he saw them – drink, gambling and the House of Lords.

To his face he was familiarly known as 'the Doctor' and, not quite behind his back, to 'his girls', as 'Furney'. He daily held court in the ABC tea shop in New Oxford Street, conveniently close to the British Museum Reading Room, where young scholars and eminent professors would lie in wait for him. He knew all the waitresses and all about them, recruiting them for his Club if he could, and bringing them little presents as events such as birthdays or Christmas occasioned.

He died on July the 5th, 1910, and was cremated. When asked how he would like to be remembered, he asked that the Clubhouse should be purchased and the Club perpetuated. Practically his last words were, "I want the Club." He had, and has, his wish.

NOTE

The information on which this article is based is mostly derived from J. Munro, editor, *F. J. Furnivall. A Volume of Personal Record*, 1911. I am grateful to the President and Secretary of the Furnivall Sculling Club, Hammersmith, for letting me see this volume, and to Jack Usher, lately Mayor's Secretary, Hammersmith, and a living encyclopaedia on all things to do with the borough.