

*Sidney George Fisher—  
The Personality of a Diarist*

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SIDNEY GEORGE FISHER<sup>1</sup> and Charles Henry Fisher were both men of kind hearts, of tender and warm affections, and of noble impulses, but in every other way they were as different, one from another, as two brothers could be. Sidney lived in an inner world of ideas, thought, speculation—he was a dreamer. Henry, on the other hand, richly endowed with practical talents, was immersed in the world of action. “It is odd,” wrote Sidney, “that two brothers should have such contrasted natures. We have no ideas in common. Between us lies the deep gulf which separates the practical and active from the contemplative character. I can understand him; he cannot understand me.”

Sidney and Henry inherited modest fortunes. Henry increased his, became a millionaire, having achieved at an early age a position of leadership in Philadelphia’s business community. Sidney, however, always lived a little beyond his means and wasted his substance. Scorning work, he enjoyed a retired literary life. In their day, then, Henry was recognized as a man of prominence, while Sidney was considered an idler. But history plays strange tricks with reputations. Today, virtually nothing is known of Henry’s career, but the career of that lazy fellow Sidney is recorded in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

<sup>1</sup> Sydney George Fisher (1856–1927), the historian, was the son of the diarist. The names of father and son were identical except for the spelling of “Sidney,” which the historian altered to “Sydney.”

Sidney George Fisher was rather proud of his background, for the Fishers had been outstanding Philadelphia shipping merchants for generations, and they had intermarried with notable families. His grandfather had married a Logan and had built "Wakefield" on ground carved out of James Logan's historic "Stenton" estate. Sidney's father, James Logan Fisher, married an aristocratic Maryland heiress, daughter of Sidney George, whose family had long been seated on the Bohemia and whose home farm was Mount Harmon on the Sassafras River.

"I always feel socially superior to a man who is not a gentleman by *birth*," wrote Sidney, "and I never yet saw one who had *risen* to a higher position, whose mind and character as well as his manners did not show the taint of his origin. Early impressions are too powerful to be removed by the influences of after life. 'Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined.' I have the satisfaction of knowing that . . . I come on both sides from good blood. . . . So that, altho I have no great reason for boasting on the subject, I have a right to consider that 'I am a gentleman,' tho a poor one."

He did not consider himself a snob, though to be sure he was over-sensitive to impressions and highly fastidious. To him, a snob was a celebrity hunter or one who wanted to advance himself socially. Of a party at his cousin's house, Sidney wrote: "The elite of our society there & no snobs. Fortunately, there are yet a few houses from which vulgar people are excluded." A few months after the battle of Gettysburg he declined an invitation to attend a small family dinner in honor of General George Gordon Meade on the grounds that it was inconvenient to return to his suburban home after dark. Why go to the dinner anyway? He had known Meade all his life. Such distinctions which came to Sidney George Fisher were always accepted casually: "Re-

ceived yesterday a notice that I had been elected a member of the American Philosophical Society. I suppose I should consider it an honor."

Sidney was born in 1809 and was left an orphan at the age of twelve. Despite the loss of his parents, he remembered his childhood as a happy one. He had his two younger brothers to play with—James Logan and Charles Henry—and he had his pony, pigeons, dogs, and parties. Frequent visits were paid to the plantations in Maryland, and every summer the family coachman drove Sidney and the rest to Schooley's Mountain, a popular resort.

On finishing Germantown Academy, Sidney enrolled as a member of the class of 1828 at Dickinson College, where he attained some fame for his poetry and literary bent. That his college career was not a happy one is reflected in his memories of it which were "connected with some painful, few agreeable associations." He was bitterly critical of his guardian for not having sent him to Harvard or to Yale. Sidney's last contact with Dickinson came ten years after his graduation when he returned to deliver the annual address to the Belle-Lettres and Union Philosophical Societies. On that occasion he walked somewhat condescendingly at the head of the academic procession in company with the college president, whom he described as "a damned pompous fanatical Methodist & a prig."

Following graduation he had spent nine months on a farm to learn farming, which he expected to be his occupation. But, as might have been foreseen, a farmer's life did not offer him enough. He quit the farm to read law, and in 1831 was admitted to the Philadelphia Bar.

Meanwhile, his brothers were growing up. James had followed him to Dickinson and had begun the study of medicine. Henry, after graduating from Princeton, went to France in 1832 to learn mercantile pursuits. In 1833, James

also went to Europe. He was a highly superior young man, much admired by his medical professor, skilled in music and in painting, but the victim of unconquerable melancholy. Although James traveled to improve his health, news of his death from scarlet fever in Paris came to Sidney as a stunning blow: "It prostrated and unnerved me for years, much of the inactivity, the morbid gloom of my subsequent life, is attributable to it." Of the next year, he recorded that there "died also one—the best and loveliest of her sex—upon whom I rested all my hopes of happiness." As a result of these twin calamities, Sidney did not practice law, a profession he came to hate.

Instead, he engaged mainly in a social career, paying calls, going to parties, visiting at Newport and Saratoga. He amused himself with writing poetry and essays which found a variety of publication outlets, such as *Snowden's Magazine*, the *American Quarterly Review*, the *Farmer's Cabinet*, and the *National Gazette*, a newspaper he edited briefly while its editor, Robert Walsh, vacationed at Long Branch. Sidney was also the leader and orator of an important political meeting of the young men of Philadelphia in 1834, and carried the meeting's resolves to President Jackson.

Next to a good library, Fisher loved nature and growing things. In 1834, he took over Mount Harmon, which had become run down. This four hundred acre farm, beautifully situated on the Sassafras, was to be his passion. He improved it yearly, visited it as often as he could, lavished his slender means upon it.

Once again, he fell in love and was accepted by the lady. Family interference, however, caused the engagement to be broken, and, although it could have been resumed had he so wished, his pride was hurt. Fisher had more than enough pride. Privately, he poured his misery into a poem which includes the following verse:

Hopes baffled, love and confidence betrayed,  
Grief for the dead, regret for hours wasted;  
These are times growth, and in its withering shade,  
Even passion dies and fancy's power is blasted.

But the situation was really not that awful. Sidney was still young and susceptible. Before long he was again in love, although this time not with a wealthy heiress. The object of his affection was Elizabeth Ingersoll, a member of a large and distinguished family. The courtship lasted eleven years before Sidney overcame his reluctance to ask a woman of little fortune, but whom he loved, to marry him.

During the 1840's, he made a half-hearted effort to return to the Bar. By this time, his brother Henry's business career had begun its meteoric rise. As a property manager, Henry had few equals in the city. He connected himself with banks and railroads and with foreign interests which had millions to invest in American securities. Happily married and raising a large family, Henry created an impressive country estate, "Brookwood," whose grounds were laid out by Downing. He entertained lavishly and constantly, was immensely popular and busy, and simply could not understand Sidney. How could this hard-working man understand a brother who believed that the only way to have property was to inherit it? Time and again, he pled with Sidney to exert himself, urged the sale of "Mount Harmon," begged him to go to work. Ironically, Sidney was soon just as concerned about Henry's career. Gambling heavily in stocks, involved in one financial crisis after another and in furious financial controversies, Henry was on the road that was to see him work and worry himself to death before the age of forty-eight.

In his disapproval, Sidney wrote: "Henry . . . is an example of the ill effects of rapid money making. His mind is vacant. He has no materials for thought, for he has no knowledge. The world of ideas is closed to him. Nature, art, science,

history, literature, these immense resources of enjoyment, he knows nothing of. Of what use is his wealth? He has a farm which he never sees, gardens, greenhouse, grapery, which he never looks at, books which he never reads, possessions of all sorts without fruition. Unless in action he is miserable. . . . I think he is in a bad way."

Although Sidney loved his brother and borrowed from him every year to balance his annual deficits, he had no respect for businessmen. "The capitalist is the most easily frightened of beings," he once wrote, and again "I would rather live in a hermit's cell, with books and the free control of my time, than be a man of business with the wealth of Rothschild." He quoted Socrates to the effect that a businessman is a person who thinks he is doing something when in fact he is doing nothing.

A few years after Sidney married Elizabeth Ingersoll in 1851, he gave up the remnants of his legal work and retired to "Forest Hill," a country residence four miles north of Philadelphia owned by the Ingersoll family. This was to be his home for the rest of his life. "Mount Harmon" had eaten up much of his capital and he was deeply in debt to Henry, but still Sidney hoped that the farm would pay and be able to support him. It never did, on the contrary it ruined him.

In 1860, he wrote: "By what infatuation, indolence, recklessness, want of energy, will and prudence, I could have suffered my property to dwindle away, when an effort might have saved it, is to me now inconceivable as well as shameful. [Ten years ago I had] \$1,700 [a year] beside my farm. Now I have only the farm & I consider that morally mortgaged for my debt to Henry."

Fortunately, Sidney never had to pay that debt, because when Henry died in 1862 it was canceled by his will. But Henry's death meant that Sidney now had to borrow from others, a difficult matter. Most of the money he secured

came only as kindly acts on the part of Henry's children and Henry's wealthy business associates. To his sheer horror, Sidney learned that his money raising had become public knowledge: "my affairs & difficulties & means & expences are the town talk. How terrible this is to me I cannot express." Ultimately, he mortgaged "Mount Harmon," and, on his death in 1871, was virtually a bankrupt, supported in his final illness by Henry's children.

The clue to Sidney's downfall was entered in his diary in 1857, the year he retired from the law: "I inherited the fortune and position for which others strive. What I had, because it was habitual, I did not value, and therefore instead of making exertions to increase it, I forgot that any exertion was necessary to maintain and keep it. I became self indulgent and my taste and mental bias leading me to thought rather than to action, thought instead of action became a habit. . . . I like literature, and nature, and thought, and leisure now just as I always did, and hate business and care for money just as I always did, and as a consequence I read and think and write and cannot face the idea of doing anything for money now any more than I could twenty years ago, and so I shall go on."

Had Sidney George Fisher not have had the overwhelming desire to contemplate life, living ever a little withdrawn from it so that he could see it the clearer, had he not devoted much of his time to study and mental improvement, and had he not recorded his observations, he would not be remembered today, for he was never a public figure. He would not accept responsibility. When told that there was a strong movement afoot to send him to Congress, he wrote "I won't go," and he underlined the words.

"If I do not write," he concluded, "I shall do nothing, for I am unfit for business, and to do nothing in life, to be useless and obscure, to leave no trace behind me that I have

lived, is a miserable fate." And so it was that a large quantity of articles flowed from his pen, most of them finding publication in the *North American*, a Philadelphia newspaper. During the presidential campaign of 1856, when he was opposed to Buchanan, he wrote a notable series of political commentary which was widely praised and reprinted in pamphlet form. About this time, also, he published two little volumes of poetry. All his work was issued anonymously or over the pseudonym of "Cecil." "Cecil" became a well-known and influential name, but was dropped by Fisher in 1861 when he found that two correspondents, one for the *New York Times* and the other for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, had adopted it.

In 1859, he issued at his own expense a small book called *The Law of the Territories*, which Lippincott had refused to publish and in which Butler, who did publish it, refused to put his name because it contained sentiments unpopular with southern customers. In 1860, *The Laws of Race as Connected with Slavery* appeared, an essay on the supremacy of the white race. And in 1862 came his most profound and influential effort, *The Trial of the Constitution*.

Many other writings followed, including contributions solicited by the editors of the *North American Review* and of *The Nation*. He delivered addresses to agricultural societies, and these were always printed, as well as some other speeches, such as his oration at the centennial celebration of Germantown Academy. It is because of these writings that Sidney Fisher's career is remembered while his brother Henry's is forgotten. His unpublished writings, however, his voluminous diary, far outweighs his printed works in bulk of content. It is on his diary that this attempt to present the man is based.

Keeping a diary supplemented and gave purpose to Sidney's life of contemplation. "Did nothing all day but think," he observed, "and that sometimes is doing much." He read

deeply and constantly and found in his intellectual life "that bouyant feeling of inexpressible satisfaction—that dreamy, elated intoxication of mind by which I am rarely deserted." Withdrawn from the activities of the world, he was "very happy . . . in spite of debts & difficulty in money matters. . . . Every day is to me a divine and wondrous gift of enjoyment, which I appreciate and realize. Pleasure flows to me and inundates my life in full streams, from nature, from books, from my own thoughts, from wife and child, from social & political events, from everything I see & hear & feel."

Fisher considered himself a religious man, although he practiced no particular religion. Of the Episcopal church where his wife attended, he wrote: "I have never been to our village church. . . . I think I can employ Sunday as profitably, as religiously at home. It is very well for the multitude to have a day consecrated to religious observances, for otherwise the engrossing care of the world would exclude religious ideas altogether from most minds. But for the thinking man, every day is Sunday; he sees the moral, the divine in truth, and truth governs every day and all things, the most common and familiar. His thoughts are his church."

Shortly after the death of his favorite niece, Fisher set down ideas about his own death: "It has of late, why I cannot tell, become a mental habit with me to contemplate death, to think of the subject constantly, to go thro imaginary deathbed scenes. I don't know how I shall make out when the moment comes, but I have an idea that I shall die very calmly. I believe it is not half so bad as we imagine it. It is one of the most common operations of nature, as common as eating or sleeping and cannot be very hard to endure. It is to be sure an awful mystery, but so also is life. The future is very uncertain, so it always is whilst we are alive in the world, and the same God, Nature, or System of

Causation, or whatever other name you give to the idea of a Providence, has charge of us after death as in life, and judging from what we know, we may trust in him with much confidence."

The death of his brother Henry, brought forth the following: "Truly this is a world of the dying. We are all indeed dying with greater or less speed and belong to the transient, fleeting things which are never for a moment the same. . . . Life rides upon the present moment, which is inconceivably small and swift. The past is not, the future is not, the present in the act of conceiving it becomes the past. What then are we? Spirits taking form for a time and becoming visible, soon to become spirits again and invisible, and still to live? Or manifestations of the great over-soul and thus phenomenal, without independent life? Or out-growths from the tree of humanity, the archetypal man, like leaves on an oak, grown in successive crops, which perish tho the tree lives, man surviving tho men die. Or immortal souls with separate and individual life, growing here and strengthened by toil and suffering, aspiring ever to good we cannot reach because of the obstructions of the flesh and released by death from earthy bonds, so that death is really a birth into a new sphere of higher and purer living. All these possibilities we can think, but who can tell what really and soberly to believe."

The men Fisher most admired were those whose knowledge was founded on abstract or general principles, not mere facts. He admired men for what they were, not for the positions they held. He appreciated men who tried to better themselves, even if they failed to achieve his own intellectual level. Of his book collecting cousin, Henry D. Gilpin, a former attorney general of the United States, Fisher commented: "As the old Abbe Correa said of Walsh, Gilpin's mind was a reservoir, not a fount. He had no originality of

thought, but he was a student, and, so far as mere acquirement makes one, a scholar.”

In 1839, Sidney was “obliged against my will to go to a lecture by Dr. [Gouverneur] Emerson for the Mercantile Library. He met me today and asked me to accompany him on the stage. He is what is called a ‘natural philosopher,’ that is a man of small mind and no soul, who upon the ground of knowing the names of a few minerals and plants, how many legs belong to a pismire and how many vertebrae compose the backbone of a spider, is yclept a man of science, figures as a member of all sorts of societies, and passes with the vulgar, who rarely look beyond the surface, for a learned man.”

On the subject of history and other readings, Fisher’s mind changed as he grew older. In 1838, he thought that “History is the most important of all studies, properly pursued. It is the study of man, collectively and individually; it is both biography and philosophy, and from it we may learn the motives of action, the varieties of character and the general principles of government and society.”

Two years later, however, he was to write: “A few books really well read and thoroughly understood, are better than a whole library of crude undigested matter which crams the memory without exercising the intellect. . . . Imagination and reason are the highest faculties, poetry and philosophy are their appropriate sphere, and as imagination is higher than reason, so is poetry higher than philosophy. The works of the great masters in both should be studied till the mind is imbued with their thought and sentiment. Shakespeare, Spencer, Bacon, Locke and others of their order less in rank will do more for a man in elevating, purifying and informing his mind, strengthening his faculties, enriching his fancy, giving force and beauty to his language and governing his conduct, than all the history, law, political economy, or

natural philosophy that ever was written, tho these are not to be despised, or wholly neglected."

Some years later, he narrowed his stand to the following statement: "Philosophy is the only thing worth studying or living for. It is the highest point of knowledge and thought and gives a clue to everything else; it alone can explain history, and it makes all other departments barren and uninteresting." And, finally, in admitting his ignorance of American history, Fisher wrote: "But there is so much to read and history is so dull compared with philosophy and poetry, and the charm of fine thought, style, and imagery are so attractive that one is induced to postpone the effort to read merely for the sake of acquiring knowledge."

The changing pattern of education disturbed Fisher. In 1869, he "Read among other things the address of Mr. Ch. W. Eliot on his inauguration sometime ago as President of Harvard College. Do not like it. It is hard, dry, practical, Yankee of the utilitarian sort, in thought and sentiment not well written. There is no genial love of letters in it, no liberal views, no elegance of style, no indications of refined and cultivated taste. The colleges of the country are sinking in tone, lower and lower, in accordance with the opinion and manners of the people, I mean what is considered even the best educated portion of the people. Practical ability, physical science, knowledge that may promote success in the great and absorbing ambition of all, money making, are now immensely prized and preferred to literature, philosophy and art. Parents wish to see their sons successful men of business, not scholars and gentlemen, and to gratify this desire the colleges are reducing their standard of excellence. . . ."

That genius, however, could come to the fore without the assistance of higher education was acknowledged by Fisher in his appreciation of Abraham Lincoln. Of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, Fisher wrote "The speech in my judg-

ment establishes Lincoln's character as a man of talents and honest purposes. . . . Some of his remarks are worthy of a statesman. . . . He who wrote it is no common man." And toward the end of 1861, he added the following lines to his diary: "I have had faith in him ever since I read his inaugural speech & his first message. They contain clear proof to my mind of great natural ability, of a wisdom that is above learning, and of an honest, sincere & loving nature. . . . He is the man for this crisis."

Some of Fisher's most telling reflections dealt with politics, as, for example, the following statement written in 1849: "I think the proper position of the Whig party, regarding it as the conservative party, is in opposition. The Democratic party should be, as a general rule, in power. It is better for the country that they should be, bad as they are. Our government is a democracy. Democracy is its genius, its essence, its life. It will work better when its action is in accordance with its pervading, animating principle. It requires watching, checking, restraining, scolding, detection and exposure of its errors, evil tendencies and corruptions, and this is the office of an opposition, a strong, eager, animated minority. The Whig party, on the contrary, being essentially conservative and representing the property, education, and aristocratic tendencies of a class, is instinctively opposed to the great, marking characteristics of the government, to its true nature and the prevailing sentiments of the people. So soon, therefore, as it obtains power, it is in a false position. It must suppress its opinions, utter sentiments which are not its own, it must deceive, cajole, humbug the people by professing democracy, or it cannot succeed. The evil results of an untruth are soon apparent. Its friends are disgusted because their views and opinions are not represented, and the people are not deceived long, for all counterfeits of that nature are soon detected. The consequence is

speedy failure—failure amid the coldness of adherents and the jeers of enemies.”

“The Democrats also are more moderate in power. They can afford to be so, for they can never be suspected of conservatism. Their language always is more extreme than their deeds. Their sentiments are definite and real, and they are not afraid to avow them because they accord with the institutions and opinions of the country. The Whigs, on the contrary, are obliged to play the part of Democrats and, like most actors, exaggerate the part. They are so afraid to exhibit their conservatism that they are, to secure the populace, more radical than the Democrats themselves.”

A conversation which Fisher had with Fanny Kemble on the nature of true art indicates he understood the subject better than the actress did. “She maintained that its highest excellence consisted in its being a rigid and faithful copy of nature, whilst I argued that it was always and should be the creation of the artist’s mind, the realization of an ideal of his own imagination. . . . The truth of nature is one thing—individual portraiture another. No one ever adhered more closely to the former than the great master, Shakespeare, yet whose creations are more completely his own?”

The diarist drew inspiration from Emerson’s essays. He believed Emerson to be the most original and profound thinker of the day and deplored the fact that he was appreciated by so few. It was with Emerson in mind that he wrote: “One never tires of truth and beauty, of fine thoughts, elevated sentiments and a simple, pure, sinewy and graceful style. These are the charms of the great master in art—of Plato and Shakespeare and the Bible. We never tire of them any more than we do of sunsets and clouds and trees and flowers.”

As he grew older, Fisher inclined to become censorious and cross. The conversation of his friends bored him. Few shared

his intellectual interests. He felt very lonely. He went to a ball and despaired of the women—poor undernourished creatures, they did not look fit to become mothers. Not a pretty face in the lot! On May 7, 1863, he gloomily gave his opinion about the state of the world: "The aspect of the world is far from hopeful just now and the reign of knowledge and peace seems adjourned for our day at least. Our American life of ease, security, freedom and tranquillity is gone forever. Taxation and debt, armies and war, and something to take the place of democracy are to be our portion hereafter."

It was in 1855 that he suffered his first attack of gout, a disease which encroached gradually upon him. During a bad attack in 1861, he noted that Dr. Owen Wister "Ordered two pills tonight and some powders tomorrow. What they are, I do not know. We swallow blindly what the doctor gives, as some people do what the priest or the demagogues give." Before long he was never free from pain, and had become partially crippled. Annual summer visits to Richfield, New York, where he took the waters and bathed, provided some alleviation. By 1870, however, gout and rheumatism were no longer his worst enemies for he had become the victim of an asthma-like complaint, "this gasping and suffocation which continues sometimes for many hours and even days."

During his last months, when he had strength for little else, he devoted himself to reading his diary—a record he had kept since 1834, and which now filled more than seventy books.<sup>2</sup> This diary is, presumably, the most complete and most revealing ever compiled by a Philadelphian, and surely one of the best written ever kept by an American. It furnishes not only the story of Fisher's personal life and a running account of those of his friends, but also records the

<sup>2</sup> The Fisher diary is at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Selections from it have been published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*.

events of the day as he saw them, and his perceptions were acute.

Few people have ever had so full a final opportunity to review their past as had Sidney George Fisher. His diary was, as he once wrote, "a sort of father confessor to me, unluckily without the power of giving me either advice or absolution." He had "the vanity to think them, in parts at least, well-written, and that the various reflections on men and things, books and public affairs, are sound and well reasoned." And so he read them all over, vividly reliving the scenes of his past. When he finished the final volume in July, 1871, his life was all but over. On July 22, he scrawled in his pocket diary, "Very miserable all day. Am losing ground every day." Three days later, he died.

According to Fisher, it was Bacon who said "reading maketh a full man, writing an exact man." Fisher had done much reading and writing, and, by and large, his life had been a full one and his sentiments and outlook singularly exact. Unworldliness, his desires to live "in learned leisure and contemplative indolence," had brought on his tragedy. In his diary for 1860, there is a translation which he made from a verse of French poetry. It seems to forecast his final years of poverty, illness and obscurity.

Thus do all things change and pass,  
Thus we changing pass away,  
Leaving behind as faint a trace  
of our transitory stay,  
Of our troubled, brief life-dream,  
As a boat leaves in the stream.

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