



Leaving this happy household, Spooner went to Oswestry on the Welsh border for his education. There, he



*He spoke very slowly, often with hesitations . . .*

Much to Spooner's chagrin, throughout his life he was best known for his namesake Spoonerisms.<sup>16</sup> He was well aware of this, remarking that he 'was better known for [his] defects than for any merits'.<sup>17</sup> However, before we go any further, we must identify what a Spoonerism is. A commonly recognised definition is the unintentional mix-up of parts or words, thoughts, and phrases, often resulting in humorous phrases or situations. Some well-known examples being 'it is kisstomary to cuss the bride' and 'is the bean dizzy?'<sup>18</sup>

heard the Spoo make a Spoonerism before and now he makes a damned rotten one at the last minute'.<sup>26</sup>

While not being the type that we expect, we can confidently regard the above cases as authentic Spoonerisms. An interesting interpretation has been put forward by Potter, suggesting that due to Spooner's poor eyesight he had great difficulty recognising people, particularly large numbers of undergraduates.<sup>27</sup> We know from his own words that Spooner's eyesight was so poor that at school he 'had to apply for a special place' near the front of the class. This may well explain the large number of Spooneresque cases (such as that of Coupland and Casson) that have become part of his reputation.

Spoonerisms also showed themselves in apparent absent-mindedness and 'slips of action' to borrow a phrase from Potter. The most famous of this type comes from A. J. Toynbee, and is described in Hayter's biography of Spooner:

The acted spoonerism was witnessed by my mother's old friend Eleanor Jourdain. At a dinner party in Oxford, she saw Dr Spooner upset a salt-cellar and then reach for a decanter of claret. He then poured claret on the salt, drop by drop, till he had produced the little purple mound which would have been the end-product if he had spilled claret on the table-cloth and had then cast a heap of salt on the pool to absorb it.<sup>28</sup>

His proclivity for slips of action can also be seen in another famous story. Spooner was entertaining a guest in the Warden's Lodgings, and when it came time to leave he offered to 'see [her] safely down the stairs' as they were quite dark. Spooner then proceeded to turn off the light, and escort the poor woman down the stairs in complete darkness.<sup>29</sup> Luckily, Spooner's daughter came to their rescue, and later corroborated this story.

Unlike stories of Spooner passed down through the New College oral tradition, Spooner's writings provide a more reliable way to gauge if he truly deserved his reputation. In many cases, apparently simple errors in his writing can often be regarded as a type of Spoonerism. Potter, who wrote at length on this topic, found only forty-five written errors in Spooner's papers (roughly 250,000 words).<sup>30</sup> Luckily, Spooner had a habit of crossing out written mistakes with a single line, allowing us to see the original word. This has presented us with a small window into his thought process. In one letter he wrote 'I am so glad to hear that you are at last relieved of your terrible burden of debt'. 'Debt' was promptly crossed out and replaced with 'anxiety'. There is an evident link between the two, as the former often causes the latter.

Figure 1 is a good example of Spooner's interesting thought processes. It features three noteworthy errors that, in Spooner's usual manner, have been crossed out with a single line. In an error of anticipation, Spooner first wrote words that he had meant to write exactly three words later. On the second line, 'operation' anticipates itself three words later, and the same goes for 'science' on the sixth line<sup>31</sup>.



Figure 1: An example of Spooner's writing

A second piece of Spooner's writing (Figure 2), again shows us Spooner's slightly confused thought processes. Discussing examination results he writes, 'We seem to have held our heaps fairly evenly with other colleges', 'heaps' is crossed out and replaced with 'heads'. He goes on to write, 'female charms [supper?] added to normal undergraduate allurements are apt to be overwhelming', followed by 'whitless', which is changed to 'whirlwind', finally concluding with 'a whirlpool difficult to escape'.<sup>32</sup> Potter identified twenty-three similar errors throughout Spooner's writings.



Figure 2: More of Spooner's writing

One last written error worth discussing is shown in Figure 3. Here Spooner seems undecided on how to separate the two words 'cow' and 'house'. While we have all at some point thought about the correct spelling of a word, this example taken from papers on College estates stands out,

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

particularly Spooner's rather interesting final attempt to spell the word, writing 'co whouse'.<sup>33</sup> A student of Spooner's, Julian Huxley, observed that Spooner might have had a problem with what he described as the 'association centres' of his brain. This may go some way to explain Spooner's difficulties in word usage.

Figure 3: An example of Spooner's writing

*A moderately useful man . . .*