

William Spooner

(William Archibald Spooner)

July 22, 1844 (London, UK) – Aug 29, 1930 (Cumbria, UK)

WILLIAM SPOONER WAS HIGHLY regarded in each of the various positions he held for over sixty years on the staff of the College of St. Mary (today: New College), one of numerous smaller institutions operating under the auspices of the University of Oxford.

At St. Mary's, Spooner taught ancient history, divinity, philosophy, and the ethics of Aristotle. In addition to forty years of teaching, he also served for twenty-one years (1903-1924) as the College Warden (President).

However, it's not for his teaching or administrative skills that we remember Spooner.

In fact, toward his legacy, he likely contributed little, as it's believed most of his so-called "spoonerisms" were never uttered by him at all. Instead, they originated in the minds of others who only delighted in claiming that he (Spooner) had said them.

Are you confused?

Well, so was Dr. Spooner.

Physically, Spooner was a short man of slight build.

In April 1898, he was the subject of "Spy," the pseudonym of artist Leslie Ward, who is known for the delightful caricatures he drew over the years for the covers of *Vanity Fair*.¹

Spy's caricature of Spooner depicts a man in academic attire, his head bent in reviewing his lecture notes. Not visible in the drawing are the students assembled before the podium, the taller of whom may have seen a shock of Spooner's white hair.

As Spooner straightens up to begin his lecture, his white hair gives way to a pink forehead and then a pair of eyes barely able to peer over the top of the podium.

Spooner, well-liked and well-respected, was an unusual looking man. Biographer William Hayter described him as looking "like a white-haired baby small and (as) pink-faced as an albino, with a disproportionately large head and very short-sighted blue eyes."²

He was also very absent-minded.

He once invited a new faculty member to tea, telling his invitee that they were about to welcome a new archaeology professor to the staff.

"But sir," the man replied, "I am the new archaeology professor."

"Never mind," replied Spooner, "Come all the same."

But, it's not for his stature or absent-mindedness that he is remembered, "it's for his tendency to watch birds."

Oops! Sorry about that. "It's for his tendency to *botch words*."

Dr. Spooner often left the listener shaking his or her head, wondering if what they just heard was what he just said.

Spooner had a dyslexic tendency to transpose words, "verbal transpositions," the scholarly call them, but to everyone else, they are "spoonerisms."

Although numerous spoonerisms are attributed to Dr. Spooner, the 1979 Oxford Dictionary of Quotations provides only one substantiated spoonerism. And that comes from a comment he made when he wanted to say, "The *rate of wages* will press hard upon the employer," but the words came out as, "The *weight of rages* will press hard upon the employer."

Dr. Spooner himself took credit for only one spoonerism, and that, he claimed, took place in church. It happened when he was asked to announce the name of the next hymn to the congregation, and that's when "Conquering Kings Their Titles Take" came out as "Kinkering Congs Their Titles Take."

Other spoonerisms attributed to Spooner that may have originated with someone else first, include:

To a student, he complained: *You have tasted two whole worms; you have hissed all my mystery lectures and been caught fighting a liar in the quad.* Intended: "You have wasted two whole terms; you have missed all my history lectures and been caught lighting a fire in the quad."

At a wedding he said: *It is kisstomary to cuss the bride.*

Let us offer a toast to our queer old Dean.

"Let us offer a toast to our dear old Queen."

Mardon me, padam, but this pie is occupewed, may I sew you to another sheet? Intended: “Pardon me, Madam, but this pew is occupied, may I show you to another seat?”

A scoop of boy trouts. Intended: “A troop of Boy Scouts.”

To an audience of agriculturalists, he supposedly began his speech: *Ye noble tons of soil....*

After dropping his hat, he asked: *Will nobody pat my hiccup?* Intended: “Will nobody pick up my hat?”

To a woman at a college reception: *You’ll soon be had as a matter of course.* Intended: “You’ll soon be mad as a hatter, of course.”

When our boys come home from France, we will have the hags flung out. Intended: “... will have the flags hung out.”

To one of his students, though not a spoonerism, he asked, *Was it you or your brother who was killed in the Great War?*

Finally, there’s a story told about the time he wrote a note to a colleague asking that a meeting of importance be scheduled.

When the colleague received the note, it contained an outline of the issue to be discussed, followed by a paragraph telling him the matter had been resolved, and there was no longer a need to meet.

William Archibald Spooner died on August 29, 1930. He was laid to rest at Grasmere in Cumbria, in North West England.

1. “Leslie Ward,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leslie_Ward

2. Hayter, William. *Spooner: A Biography*, W. H. Allen, London, (1977)



A clear conscience may simply indicate the onset of senility.
James E. Stone (1944–) soil scientist, ecologist