On Campus

Year of the Lion

How Roar-ee became Columbia's golden-maned mascot.

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The Roaring Twenties: the Columbia lion, circa 1920 (Columbia University Archives).

When the Alumni Association of Columbia College met in early 1910, an important matter was set forth by the association’s president, William Curtis Demorest 1881SEAS. Demorest, whose mother, Ellen, was a famous dress designer

and fashion maven, wanted to attire the University, in a manner of speaking, with a mascot.

At the meeting, a future lawyer named George Brokaw Compton 1909CC put forth his idea. Yale, Compton argued, had its Bull Dog, Brown its Bear, Princeton its Tiger. The Army had its Mule and the Navy had its Goat. Columbia, Compton suggested, should go straight to the top of the food chain. “We have the King’s Crown,” he is quoted as saying. “Let us have the lion.”

On the face of it, this would seem an obvious crowd-pleaser. The lion represented courage, dominance, and power, and the association expressed due enthusiasm for the proposal. But not everyone was convinced. In a letter to *Spectator*, published on April 8, 1910, someone called “Alumnus” wrote:

“It has been with mingled feelings of regret and mortification that I have noticed during the past few years an evident desire on the part of a large portion of the Alumni to revert to the old order of things that certain of our fathers gave their lives to eradicate. Many, many years ago a little handful of brave men, and not the least of them our distinguished Alexander Hamilton, fought for seven long years against discouraging odds for the realization of their hope of hopes. A few of these whose office it was had the temerity to depart to such an extent from the accepted form as to restyle Kings College ‘Columbia.’ And so, I wish to enter a vigorous protest against the growing tendency to make the Crown the all-important emblem of the University. Whereas I admire the British Lion and have profound respect for his roar, I believe the eagle’s scream, harsh as it is, would be sweeter music to the shades of those who died on Harlem Heights.”

But many students of the day weren’t as sensitive to the reverberations of the long-ago war of independence. On May 4, 1910, the Student Board voted to admit the lion as the official school mascot.

So if you happen to see Roar-ee the Lion on campus this year, be sure to wish him a happy 100th birthday (lions live only to about 15 in the wild). Raise a glass to Compton and Demorest, too, for they truly unleashed a beast. As legend has it, Howard Dietz, of the Class of 1917, was so inspired by the golden-maned symbol of his alma mater that he adopted the lion as the mascot for the company for which he was head of publicity: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

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