

**Illinois Wesleyan University**

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# The 'Trial' of Oliver S. Munsell—an exposition

Robert Bray



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## ***The 'Trial' of Oliver S. Munsell—an exposition***

by Robert Bray

The first indication of serious trouble at Illinois Wesleyan University came in the form of a 'communication' from the president, Oliver S. Munsell, to the executive committee of the university's Board of Trustees: 'Dear Brethren: I fear it to be my painful duty in view of the present unhappy condition of affairs in the University affecting my usefulness and acceptability [?] to ask to be relieved from and after tomorrow, Friday, from [sic] all official duties until the annual meeting of the Board next June.' On Saturday, Feb. 22, 1873, the executive committee met in extraordinary session to consider President Munsell's request to be suspended from administration and teaching for the remainder of the spring term. Though the committee granted his wishes, nothing in its minutes hints at what the 'unhappy condition of affairs of the University' was, nor what might be Munsell's involvement in the problems.

But the nature of his difficulties became starkly and publicly clear on Tuesday, Feb. 25. The *Chicago Tribune* on that day ran two 'special dispatches' from unknown correspondents, one in Springfield IL and the other in Bloomington:

**Another Black Sheep.**  
*Special Dispatch to The Chicago Tribune.*  
SPRINGFIELD, Feb. 24.—O. S. Munsell, President of the Bloomington Wesleyan University, has tendered his resignation, to take effect immediately. It is represented that this action was taken to avoid expulsion. It is charged that he has been repeatedly guilty of gross and immoral conduct with the young lady pupils of the institution.

*Special Dispatch to The Chicago Tribune.*  
BLOOMINGTON, Ill., Feb. 25.—It is reported here that Dr. O. S. Munsell, President of the Illinois Wesleyan University, has resigned; that his resignation is not altogether voluntary on his part, and that it is to be followed by an investigation of charges quite grave in their character. This matter will be more fully developed in a few days.

These accusations were such as to be libelous if false, criminal if true ('criminal conversation,' or adultery). Munsell immediately replied in a letter (dated Feb. 27; pub.

Mar. 1) to the *Tribune* in which he denied that he had resigned the presidency and was not charged with 'criminality.' The letter also included resolutions of support from four faculty members:

**Dr. O. S. Munsell to the Chicago Tribune.**

The following communication from Dr. O. S. Munsell, of this city, appears in the *Chicago Tribune*:

To the Editor of the *Chicago Tribune*:  
BLOOMINGTON, Ill., Feb. 27, 1873.

SIR: Justice to myself demands that I notice a telegraph dispatch in your paper of the 25th inst. To its gross misstatements of facts I reply:

1. That I have not *resigned* the Presidency of the Illinois Wesleyan University; nor have I proposed to resign under any circumstances, until the Board of Trustees have held their annual meeting, and passed upon my character and official relations.
2. I am not charged with criminality, as will appear from the appended certificate, viz:  
The undersigned Faculty of the Illinois Wesleyan University, having learned, during Dr. O. S. Munsell's temporary absence from the University and city, that there were injurious reports circulated among the students affecting his character and usefulness, felt it to be their duty, at once, to inquire into the facts; and found, upon such investigation as seemed to be practicable:  
First—That there was no evidence that Dr. M. had ever visited any of the lady students separately or secretly.  
Second—That the acts of indiscretion complained of had, in every case, occurred in the presence of third parties.  
Third—That there was no evidence that criminated Dr. M., or impeached his moral character; but that the complaints were of impropriety only.  
H. C. DE MOTTE,  
J. R. JAMES,  
B. S. POTTER,  
GEO. R. CROW.
3. It is true that, for the sake of peace, and to allay the agitation these things have occasioned, I have asked the Executive Committee to release me from actual duty in the University until the Board of Trustees meets. I shrink from no investigation, however rigid, if it be only just; and I have only to ask from the public, in view of twenty-six years of unblemished active public life, that they now suspend judgment until I can be fairly tried for the events of the last six months.

Respectfully, OLIVER S. MUNSELL.

Then on Fri., Feb. 28, the local *Weekly Pantagraph* ran the following article, here given in transcription (note: the weekly edition was mainly a digest of news from the *Daily Pantagraph*, but in this case the daily had not noticed the Munsell affair):

'For a week past, the city has been filled with rumors that Rev. Dr. O. S. Munsell, President of the Illinois Wesleyan University, was guilty of criminal indiscretions with some of the female pupils of the University. We have refrained from saying anything on the subject until we could obtain definite information concerning it, knowing that it was a charge that involved not only Dr. Munsell's reputation, but also, to some extent, the good name of the University. From what we consider an entirely reliable source of information, we learn that the most that is alleged against Dr. Munsell is that he was somewhat profuse in his attentions to some of the ladies, and that he kissed them rather too frequently. Nothing of a criminal nature is alleged against him by any one connected with the students or faculty. An investigation of the charges will at once take place, and the results made known. Dr. Munsell, who is known to be naturally rather demonstrative in his demeanor towards ladies, asserts his entire innocence of any evil intention or improper acts. He is now, we believe, absent from home. He has been President of the institution for sixteen years, during which time he has labored incessantly for its prosperity, and has donated to it more than he has received in salary. His relations with the faculty have been uniformly friendly.

The University is an institution that Bloomington is proud of, and every citizen of the city is zealous in upholding it. It is in the hands of able and trustworthy men, and is universally regarded as an honor to the city and the State. Ladies were first admitted as pupils about two years ago, and now about forty lady pupils are in attendance. Dr. Munsell has been relieved of his classes, and is, just at present, not on duty. He is still President, however, and he will probably remain so until next June, when the Board of Trustees meet.

Whatever may be proven against Dr. Munsell—and we are of the opinion that nothing of a serious character can be shown—the continued prosperity of the university [sic] cannot be affected by it in the estimation of those who are familiar with its affairs. It numbers among its trustees and faculty several eminent men, who have by strenuous exertions built up a noble institution in Bloomington. Many of our citizens are graduates of the university [sic], and the whole city feels deeply interested in its welfare. We trust the evil tongue of slander will not pursue these charges any farther, until the result of the investigation is known.'

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, the executive committee met at the office of long-term trustee John Magoun. There could be but one agenda item: what's going on, Dr. Munsell? 'Prof. Jaques. . . gave a statement on behalf of the Faculty of which complaints

have been made and then and there Dr. Munsell replied giving explanations of the matters complained of. . . . The minutes do not detail what the charges were, or how Munsell explained his involvement in them. But given the damaging publicity, a public response to the charges was imperative. This document the committee intended to draw up on the morrow, but 'on account of the illness of the chair' (Charles W. Holder) that didn't happen. In fact, the executive committee did not again meet until a week later, Mar. 6, 1873 (at the office of trustee O. T. Reeves). They came to the following resolution:

Illinois Wesleyan University, March 6th, 1873. In view of the fact that certain publication have been in some of the newspapers and numerous reports have been in circulation in this community touching the moral character and effecting the reputation of Dr. O. S. Munsell so long and so favorably known as President of the Illinois Wesleyan University, The executive committee of the Joint Board of Trustees very far from believing or assuming that it was their prerogative to determine any question respecting the reputation of the President of the Institution yet because of the serious and grave character of some of the reports said to be floating about <sup>believe</sup> behind that the interest of the President and the institution itself would be best subserved by find out what were the complaints and facts in the case. This they have done and they now feel prepared and authorized to say that no body professing to have any information at all upon the subject pretends that they are or ever have been any charges or suspicions against Dr. Munsell of a criminal character. The complaint have ~~to~~ come to the faculty or of which they know any thing are simply charges of familiarity with the Young Ladies of the Institution. The Committee feel that it would serve no good purpose to state those indiscretions, complained of were but they were simply such manifestations of regard as a good father might show to his daughters or a kind brother to his ~~sister~~ sister and that while the facts show that Dr. Munsell may have been imprudent yet they could not justly be construed to mean more than that. The committee of investigation unanimously concur in the statement of the case made by the Faculty and published in the Chicago Tribune of the first inst.:

First, That there was no evidence that Dr. Munsell had visited any of the Lady students seperately or secretly.

Second, that the acts of indiscretion complained of in every case occurred in the presence of third parties.

Third, that there was no evidence that criminated (and the committee would add "or that tended to) Dr. Munsell or impeached his moral character.

The Executive Committee feel warrented in stating that no interruption will occur in the regular work of instruction in the university which will go forward as heretofore.

The public may rest assured that ample provisions has been made by the members of the faculty for the prosecution of the full work of instruction in the institution.

C. W. Holder	Jesse Birch	John Magoun
O. T. Reeves	J. A. Wilson	

The executive committee first intended the above as a public statement that would put the matter to rest (especially in view of Munsell's being exonerated of 'criminality:' 'there was no evidence that criminated (and the committee would add "or that tended

to” . . .)). So the members at first decided to publish the statement, then, strangely, reversed themselves—no reason given.

The annual meeting of the Board of Trustees and Visitors ordinarily took place during the university’s commencement week, always in June. Presumably, at that meeting the executive committee would report on the Munsell matter. But the calendar was abruptly modified: there would be a meeting of the full board and visitors just as soon as everyone could be convened. No information regarding this change is to be found in the trustee minutes, which move directly from the Mar. 6 meeting of the executive to Mar. 19, when the special board and visitors meeting began. Why or by whom an immediate session had been demanded is unknown.

Since this extraordinary gathering would turn out to be the ‘trial’ of Oliver S. Munsell on charges of moral turpitude, it may be helpful to describe how it was organized and conducted. The Methodist Episcopal Church, Central Illinois Conference, had acquired what we might call ‘majority ownership’ in Illinois Wesleyan University in 1856, when, in exchange for increased financial support, the church would thenceforth have a much greater say in how the institution was conducted. There would be six clergy elected or appointed from the Illinois Conference as visitors (and, after the Illinois Conference spun off territory to create the Central Illinois Conference, twelve visitors total). These visitors would attend the annual commencement exercises and the board of trustees meeting and then report to their respective conferences. While the visitors may not have had votes in the trustees’ decisions—in the absence of roll-call votes in the minutes, this is not clear—they were generally present and surely had a voice in the deliberations. In addition to the visitors, there were several Methodist ministers on the board proper. So that, taken together, the MEC influence on the university was quite powerful.

According to the MEC’s *Book of Discipline*, whenever a member of a conference had charges of any sort made against him, he was ‘put on trial.’ The evidence was compiled, witnesses were called and examined, and both the complainant and the defendant had ‘attorneys’ to interrogate (and cross-examine) the witnesses. At the end

of these proceedings, the minister being charged had the opportunity to speak. Then came the verdict: all members of the conference deciding the fate of one of their own by majority vote. In small matters, a reprimand; more serious, a suspension; most serious, expulsion from the 'Methodist connection.'

Munsell's trial followed these procedures pretty closely, with the significant exception that the jury consisted of the board of trustees, some of whom—and all of the executive committee—were *not* Methodist clergy (or perhaps even Methodists). Thus their professional training and values would not necessarily align with those of the MEC.

The trial opened at 10am on Wednesday, Mar. 19, 1873, in a hall of the new but still uncompleted 'University Building.' Charles W. Holder was in the chair, along with the other three members of the executive committee, eleven other trustees and six visitors. And, of course, President Oliver S. Munsell. The first order of business required the executive committee to report to the entire group the charges against the president. The trial would adjourn until 2pm to give the executive committee time to put its report in order. After hearing it, the board moved a committee of five to 'make out charges and specifications' and report the same. This group was given until reconvening at 7pm to get its work done.

But at the start of the evening session, the committee on 'charges and specifications' wasn't finished, so made a 'partial report' only. This included 'specification five' (which would be one of ten charges; hereafter referred to as 'spec. + number'). The board now 'took it up,' naming 'Brother[s] [Jesse] Birch and [Owen T.] Reeves. . . to conduct the examination [of] the witnesses on the part of the Board.' The witnesses called were four members of the university faculty: Jabez R. Jaques, G. R. Crow, B. S. Potter and S. S. Hamill. All testified. But what did they say and of what? This is, from a historical perspective, the most disappointing aspect of the minutes: no specification of what the specifications were and almost nothing of what the witnesses said. All we can infer concerning spec. 5 is that it probably centered around a university function, off-campus, both because these faculty were involved and, tantalizingly, Prof. Crow was asked about 'the position of different parties on the rostrum at Durley's Hall,'

a downtown Bloomington building popular for meetings social and serious. This is all we have for spec. 5, and it is more than we shall know of eight of the other ten. Only in spec. 7 will we get a real glimpse of what the charges were about.

Thurs., Mar 20, was the day for female student testimony. The evening before, a couple of board members had gone forth (presumably to sundry boarding houses around town) to tell the coeds that their presence as witnesses would be required at the University Building the following morning. All but one agreed to come, while the holdout (Alice Wheeler) agreed to give her testimony privately to 'Prof. Gillett, [J. G.] Evens and Brother [G. R. Palmer].

The trial resumed at 9am. Here follows a list of witness and specifications, in the order in which they were 'taken up' by the board:

Spec. 7, 'Miss Mary Hood called up and testified.'

Spec. 8, 'Miss Clara Irwin [Erwin] called and testified.'

'Ella Irwin [Erwin] called.'

Spec. 9, 'Clara Irwin [Erwin] called.'

Spec. 1: Anna North, Edna Morrison and Rose Kennedy.

Spec. 2, Jenny Fisher and Minnie Crish [not yet identified as a student].

Spec. 5, a 'Mrs. Crish' [unidentified: perhaps Minnie Crish's mother?]

Spec. 3, Lillie Lyon.

Also: 'Clara Irwin [Erwin] recalled and testified as to First Specification.'

The Board's having now heard the testimony of these eight students (plus the unidentified Minnie Crish and Mrs. Crish), 'Prof. Gillett moved a vote of thanks to the Ladies [sic] attendance, and the spirit as to giving in their testimony [which was] carried by a rising vote.' Testimony remained to be entered from Alice Wheeler, who as noted above had refused to attend the trial, and student Mary Francis Kennaga. The former's 'deposition' was 'presented to the Board, Specs. 5 & 6; Kennaga's related to spec. 10. At this point, 'defence called A. H. Davies [unidentified] who testified as to First Specification.' Four men's testimony completed the morning session: 'Mr. Scott,' 'C. A.



Hazelwinkle,' [Richard W.] Kinady' and 'Mr. Groves.' The minutes do not mention the specifications on which they testified. The trial now adjourned until 2pm.

In the afternoon there was little left to do other than to take a bit more testimony, hear from Munsell and then adjourn until evening, when the trial would reach its verdict. Profs. Crow, Jaques and Potter were called on spec. 5, and that ended the testimony. 'Dr. Munsell made statement [sic] in reference to the various complaints made against him.' Nothing is recorded of what he said.

At 7:30 that evening 'Prof. Gillett of Jacksonville' opened the session with prayer. An item-by-item vote on the ten specifications immediately followed:

Board as per adjournment. Prayer was offered by Prof. Gillett of Jacksonville. Moved that we take up the bill item by item. The roll was called and nineteen members responded to their names: Dr. Davies moved first specification be not sustained. The first motion prevailed unanimously. Bro. Chaffee moved that Specification be sustained, the motion unanimously prevailed. On motion Judge McClun, Third specification sustained. Dr. Buck moved Fourth specification be sustained--prevailed. Dr. Gillett Spec. Fifth not sustained. Dr. Davies moved Spec. 6th not sustained carried. Specification Seven was not sustained. Moved that specification be sustained in part, the testimony showing that Dr. Munsell visited the Misses Hoods three times instead of five times, kissing on entering and on leaving, motion prevailed. Eighth specification sustained. Ninth specification sustained by Dr. Munsell's admission. Specification Ten not sustained. Specifications two, three, four, eight, nine being sustained and seven sustained in part, moved that the charge of improper conduct is sustained. A paper containing resolutions was adopted as follows:

Moved that the members of this Board sign the paper just adopted and this be given to the press for publication carried. On motion the Secretary was instructed to furnish Dr. Munsell a certificate copy of the charges and specifications also the furnishing of the Board and the papers adopted by the Board, Dr. Munsell tendered his resignation as President of the University which on motion of Brother Applebee was accepted. The following paper was presented by Dr. Davies and Brother Evens which was adopted. (B) on Motion the paper was ordered to be published. On motion Dr. Munsell was appointed Agent for building fund. On motion Executive Committee appointed to correspond to secure a president and by the commencement in June. Moved that the Executive Committee be authorized to make all necessary arrangements for the work of teaching in the University for the next term.

The tally was 5+ sustained, 4 not sustained. Without the motion to sustain spec. 7, after amending the number of Munsell's visits to the 'Misses Hood' from five to three, we would know almost nothing about the nature and substance of *any* of the charges. Spec. 7 asserted that Munsell had been observed kissing the Hood sisters 'upon entering and

leaving' what was probably their boarding house in the town. We may with some assurance infer that 'over-familiarity' of an affectionate sort was the basis of the other nine specifications. If so, this was more than enough for the Board to expect his resignation from the presidency of Illinois Wesleyan University and for OSM to tender it therewith, which he did, effective immediately, though he was to carry on for a time with the building fund. The 'certificate copy' of the charges and verdicts supposedly given to OSM has not turned up. Beyond the 'kissing the Misses Hood' and the vague mention of the position of the people on the rostrum at Durley's Hall, we know nothing explicit concerning the accusations. Nor is it likely we ever shall.

On Friday, March 28, the *Weekly Pantagraph* carried a formal communication from the IWU Board of Trustees, signed by all the members, that would be the university's only public statement on the fate of Oliver S. Munsell:

**The Dr. Munsell Scandal—The Accused  
Virtually Exonerated.**

The accusations against Rev. Dr. O. S. Munsell, President of the Illinois Wesleyan University, were the subject of investigation last week by the joint Board of Trustees and Visitors of the University. The result of their investigation is embodied in the following communications:

To EDITOR OF PANTAGRAPH: I am directed by the Board of Trustees of Illinois Wesleyan University to furnish for publication the following statement and resolution. The resolution was unanimously adopted by the Board of Trustees at their meeting on the 20th inst.

Respectfully, O. T. REEVES,  
Secretary of Board of Trustees.

**STATEMENT OF TRUSTEES AND VISITORS.**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill., March 20, 1913.

We, members of the Joint Board of Trustees and Conference Visitors of the Illinois Wesleyan University, having been called together to inquire into certain complaints alleged against Dr. O. S. Munsell, affecting his relation to the University, have endeavored to carry forward the investigation without prejudice, and with an earnest desire to do justice to all parties.

After having spent two days in carefully examining the witnesses and weighing the testimony in regard to the improprieties alleged, and feeling the solemn responsibility resting upon us, we would express our conclusions, as follows:

First. We regard the course of Dr. Munsell in kissing different young ladies as unwise and very improper, and that his position as President of this University heightens this folly and impropriety.

Second. No criminality has been alleged or proven by the testimony adduced.

Third. The testimony in our judgment has failed to prove any flagrant improprieties.

Fourth. The improprieties which were proven, are in our judgment very materially modified by the fact, as clearly shown by the testimony, that the acts were all done in the presence of third parties and under circumstances which unmistakably show the absence of any criminal intent on the part of the accused. (Signed.)

C. W. Holder,	Geo. R. Palmer,
John Magoun,	J. S. Cummings,
James Birch,	F. M. Chaffee,
J. Hall,	R. N. Morse,
H. Buck,	R. N. Davies,
J. G. Evans,	W. H. McVey,
J. E. McEllan,	B. Applebee,
W. G. McIlwain,	O. T. Reeves,
E. O. Hyde,	P. G. Gillett,
I. R. Gorin,	James A. Willson.

**RESOLUTION OF THANKS.**

Resolved, By the Board of Trustees of Illinois Wesleyan University, That we tender to Oliver S. Munsell, D. D., the hearty thanks of this board, for his long, faithful and self-sacrificing services in behalf of the university; and we regard the rapid and healthy growth of the university as being largely due to his labors.

The facts set forth by the Trustees will not, we presume, be gainsaid by any one. The construction put upon the acts of Dr. Munsell by the Trustees is, of course, their own, and will strike some people favorably and others unfavorably. We do not intend to discuss the subject. It is surely a matter of congratulation to every one who wishes well for the University, that the exaggerated reports of guilt dwindle down, when the evidence is adduced, to such a small affair.

Dr. Munsell has resigned the Presidency of the University, voluntarily, and his resignation has been accepted. An election for a new President will take place at the regular meeting of the Trustees next June. Dr. Munsell will, however, remain as financial agent of the University Building Fund this year, in which position he has been acting efficiently for some time past.

For the sake of clarity, here is the part of the article that gives the Trustees' statement, as taken from the typescript copy of the minutes:

Bloomington Illinois, March 20th 1873. We the members of the joint Board of Trustees and Conference Visitors of Illinois Wesleyan University having been called together to inquire into certain complaints alleged against Dr. Munsell affecting his relations to the University have endeavored to carry forward the investigation without prejudice and with an earnest desire to do justice to all parties. After having spent two days in carefully examining the witnesses and weighing the testimony in regard to the improbabilities alleged and feeling the solemn responsibility resting upon us would express our conclusion as follows: First we regard the course of Dr. Munsell in kissing different young ladies is unwise and improper and that his position as President of the University heightens the folly and impropriety. Second, no criminality has been alleged or the testimony addressed.

Third, the testimony in our judgement has failed to prove any flagrant improprieties. Fourth, the improprieties which were proven are in our judgement very materially modified by the fact as clearly shown by the testimony that the acts were all done in the presence of third parties and under circumstances which unmistakably show the absence of criminal intent upon the parties of the accused.

Signed:

C. W. Holder  
John Magoun  
Jesse Birch  
Z. Hall  
H. Buck  
J. G. Evens  
J. E. McLean

W. G. McDowell  
E. C. Hyde  
P. H. Gillette  
J. R. Goin  
Jesse A. Wilson  
G. R. Palmer  
J. S. Cummings

C. W. C. Chaffee  
R. N. Davies  
R. N. Davies  
W. H. McVoy  
B. Appleton

B. Resolved that ~~ix~~ we tender to Oliver S. Munsell D. D. the hearty thanks of this board for his long and faithful selfsacrificing services in behalf of the University and regard the rapid and healthy growth of the university as being largely due to his labors.

R. N. Davies,  
J. G. Evens,

The emphasis in the Trustees' statement is on the absence of *criminality* or *criminal* intent in the 'unwise and improper' acts of the ex-president: kissing, sad to say, but *no sex*, glad to say. To the *Weekly Pantagraph* Munsell was 'virtually exonerated' and all would be well with the university from then on, although Munsell would no longer be a part of it. Civic pride in IWU could continue and grow. The university's good name was preserved; that of Oliver S. Munsell, however, had been ineradicably stained.