

1953-1960

IN CONSIDERING the doings of the Chicago Literary Club from 1953-1960, I am reminded of the opening lines of a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier. The first two lines read simply,

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our fev'rish ways.

Also, I like the third line,

“Reclothe us in our rightful mind . . .”

I was curious to see to what extent our programs had reflected “our fev'rish ways”—whether we had uncovered any evidence that humanity was gradually being reclothed in its rightful mind, and whether the mistakes and misdeeds of our recent past are, or can ever be, forgiven.

It has already become difficult to picture our world as it was before 1953—before the big expressways were opened, and before the biggest of the big buildings that now stand out on our skyline had risen. Office-workers on hot summer days made repeated trips from desk to window and back, now to open a window for a breath of fresh air, now to close the window in order to shut out the din made by passing streetcars. Typists and stenographers arrived punctually in the morning, wore dresses instead of mini-skirts or pants, hung up their wraps and adjusted their eyebrows before punching the time-clock, and pounded manual typewriters instead of electric ones. Carbon paper had not yet been supplanted by photocopiers so that a typist with five carbons in her machine had real trouble making erasures if she discovered a mistake.

When man began to make artificial chemical elements like plutonium during World War II, the exploitation of the unnatural had peaked. The explosion of the plutonium bomb over Nagasaki showed that these developments had not been the idle dreams of

long-haired atom-splitters, and the death of 73,000 people there showed that mankind now had the power to blast itself out of existence. People were faced with the disconcerting paradox that if humanity were completely and instantaneously exterminated by a single nuclear explosion there would be nobody left to mourn, so that the total emotional impact would be like that of a tree falling unheard in the jungle, namely, zero.

The writings of philosophers like Sartre and Kierkegaard had not yet made much of an impression, so that the word "existentialism" had not yet appeared in dictionaries, or textbooks, or the programs of the Chicago Literary Club. Furthermore, thinking in the field of ecology had not yet got to the point we have reached today. People did not realize that predatory animals have their place in the wild kingdom. Consequently people had not yet been upset by the thought that *human* predators might similarly have their place in society.

Against this background, the history of the Chicago Literary Club becomes especially interesting. In the first hundred years of its existence it has seen nations born and kingdoms end. We have seen the British Empire of Queen Victoria shrink and the German Empire of 1871 disintegrate. How can a small organization survive while monstrous, overwhelmingly powerful establishments collapse?

One is tempted to begin with statistics. I have in mind a student in a biometry course. If he were here he would soon convince us, with the help of pie-diagrams, frequency tables, and t-tests, that if all those members who fall asleep here on Monday evenings were laid end-to-end they'd be more comfortable.

From October 1953 to May 1960, the total number of papers read was 210. Attendance ranged on Monday evenings from a maximum of 57 (the night Earl Shilton read his nostalgic paper "Boots, Shoes, and Notions") to a minimum on one terrible night in December 1958 when 22 members fought their way through the storm. The figure 57 was nearly equalled on two other occasions—one when Ernst Puttkammer spoke on Russia, the other when John Nuveen read the paper, "Let's Start with the State Department". On both occasions the audience numbered 56.

The most frequent essayists were Percival Bailey, Julian Jackson, Benjamin Wham, and Ernest Zeisler; each contributed five

papers in these seven seasons. Four papers were contributed by Fred Jung, and three papers each were read by Baer, Ball, Bing, Carter, Carl Dragstedt, Halperin, Hume, Willard King, Krieg, Mullin, Nuveen, Norman Parker, Puttkammer, Shilton, Stevers, Stone, and von Bonin.

The papers of the 1953-1954 season were oblivious to the world disturbances—the Korean War, the Mau-Mau murders, and the Russian hydrogen bomb. There are three that I remember best. One by Norman Parker, “An Ancient Trade Route: From Ass to Airplane”, described the perils of travel by merchants from the French Mediterranean coast to the Atlantic. Another by Warren McCulloch had the shortest possible title, “I”, which raised the curious question to what extent artificial objects like dentures or implanted plastic arteries are really part of a person. The third, by Godfrey Eyler, “On the Way Home”, was an extraordinary account of his journeys home from Club meetings.

Similarly, the papers of 1954-1955 ignored H-bombs and “McCarthyism”. In Hancock’s paper on the Ulysses of Homer’s *Odyssey*, he questioned why a character so shifty, dishonest, and neglectful of home and family should be considered a hero instead of a scoundrel. Pillinger presented an appreciation of Kathryn Mansfield in his paper, “K.M.”, Buenger in “German Conquistadores”, and Baer in “The Decline of Hvar” focussed on surprising, rarely noticed aspects of South American and European history. Carlson’s “Science and Life” expressed concern that science affects so many people only through its impact on technology and seems to have little effect on their thinking, while preference is given to occultism, astrology, and downright quackery.

The most exciting paper was Carter’s “The Fiery Bath”, the story of a great forest fire in Minnesota in 1894. At its climax, the passengers on a northbound train found the afternoon sky darkening. The train was soon stopped by a crowd of terrified people fleeing from a burning village ahead. They boarded the train which backed up slowly because the engineer was dreading a possible collision with an on-coming freight train. The slow-moving train caught fire and had to be abandoned near a swampy lake. Here passengers and crew protected themselves against the flames with water and mud. The fire destroyed several villages, including Hinckley, where a monument to the victims now stands. Four

hundred eighteen people lost their lives and many others, their family, friends, and earthly possessions.

Going hastily over the years from 1955 to 1960, the paper I remember best was on Ladies' Night 1955 when Puttkammer unravelled the mystery of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

During the 1957-1958 season while Sputnik orbited the earth and Little Rock was under martial law the outstanding papers were Percival Bailey's "The Seat of the Soul", Preston Bradley's "The Lone Eagle Remembered", Carl Dragstedt's "A Night to Remember", and Harry Harding's "Border Bandits".

In contrast to previous years, some striking world events of 1958 appeared in the essays of the Club. At this time the general population was preoccupied with unidentified flying objects. This concern was humorously reported by Roy Osgood in "The Hasty Dish". Such persistence of antiscience was as discouraging as when it had been deplored by Anton Carlson in 1955.

A particular triumph of unreason was described by Ernest Zeisler in December, 1959, in "The Great Salk Vaccine Fiasco". This vaccine against poliomyelitis was still being promoted and advertised after its ineffectiveness had become evident. One wonders how much longer its proponents would have continued to exploit humanity but for the fortunate development of the Sabin vaccine which we now use. Zeisler braved vicious criticism by the Establishment when he presented his minutely documented paper. It is greatly to the credit of the Chicago Literary Club that here he found a perceptive audience.

However, most papers have been historical or geographical or contemplative. Eyler's wonderful 1954 paper, "On the Way Home", told simply of the pleasure he derived from thinking over the Club evening while he made the 22-mile journey home.

For my part, I enjoy papers in which specialists in law, finance, architecture, engineering, or pure science tell us of their dilemmas and let others see the world for a few moments through their eyes. But essays of varied sorts are essential to maintain the character of the Club in the picture as they have been in the years 1953-1960.

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