1874-1924

THE ORIGINAL PURPOSES of The Chicago Literary Club were propounded by Robert Collyer, the first president, at the first annual dinner. Speaking generally on the topic of "Literature and Great Cities," Collyer expressed his "anticipation that beside the pleasure and profit each man of us will receive from these gatherings, there will be this solid purpose at the heart of all, to build up in our young city a society of men who will do all they can for the development of literary culture". Describing the basis for this anticipation, he told the members:

The Chicago Literary Club was the result of a feeling those who became members of it had in common before they came together, that the time had fully come when all true lovers of books in our city should enter into a league through which whatever each man had of special worth to his fellows should be brought to the exchange, so that there might be a common wealth of culture which had come to any ripeness, together with a company of men eager and anxious to welcome every new sign of such culture either among those of their own community or those who might come to us from otherwheres.

In its first year, the constitution of The Chicago Literary Club was amended to express the object of the Club to be social, as well as literary and aesthetic. This purpose was first appropriately honored at the annual dinner at which President Robert Collyer made the remarks quoted above (along with many others which even Mr. Gookin[1] found too long to quote *in extenso*). The ban-

1. The writer of this chapter must acknowledge his great debt to Frederick William Gookin, the author of The Chicago Literary Club's semi-centennial history, published in 1926. The atmosphere of the Club, as described in this chapter, necessarily comes first through Mr. Gookin's eyes and point of view. This writer has felt entirely free to make liberal use of Mr. Gookin's felicitous phrasing, even (at least with respect to short passages) without use of "inverted commas", the copyright to Mr. Gookin's text being in the name of The Chicago Literary Club.

Mr. Gookin was a member of The Chicago Literary Club from February 26, 1877 until his death on January 17, 1936. As recording secretary of the Club for the forty years 1880–1920 and the writer of its semi-centennial history, he personified its tradition.

quet was "laid" in the "ladies' ordinary" of the Sherman House. To quote a contemporary newspaper account, signed by the secretary as the official record of the meeting:

> The Chicago Literary Club which began its life several weeks ago, and numbers among its membership the most notable scholars, wits and poets we have among us, by last evening came to the time when it seemed proper to inaugurate its serious labors by a social meeting in which speeches should be made, a feast should be eaten, and a time of good fellowship generally be had . . . At 8 o'clock, a full attendance being present, the members sat down to the feast. This was all that it should be and needs no description. It might be remarked in passing that the literary men displayed an epicurean taste and delicacy that presages that they will live long to confer the benefits of their labors upon us. When all had eaten heartily and a modest glass of pure wine had been added to the inward stores, the literary character and talents of the organization . . . found expression in speeches.

Note that only "a modest glass" of wine was needed.

Annual dinners were not the only social functions. On November 5, 1874, an excuse was found in the eightieth birthday of William Cullen Bryant, in honor of which the club had a dinner. The literary fare was prodigious. Dinner was preceded by a paper on "Thomas DeQuincy" and followed by addresses by two of the poet's brothers, one by President Collyer, four by members of the Club, and finally by a poem written for the occasion. Apparently William Cullen Bryant himself did not attend.

The Club enjoyed the opportunity of entertaining other visiting personalities. One such event was held in the Grand Pacific Hotel on October 8, 1880 in honor of Thomas Hughes, whose *Tom Brown's School Days* depicting Rugby at the time of Matthew Arnold had been boyhood reading for most of the Club members. Matthew Arnold himself was a guest on January 19, 1884, at a "delightful affair" attended by eighty-three members.

Although the first annual dinner of The Chicago Literary Club was held in the "ladies' ordinary" of the Sherman House, there is no record that ladies were present. The agreeable custom of Ladies' Nights did not begin until October 28, 1877. Charles Gilman Smith, Chairman of the Committee on Arrangements and Exercises, scheduled Ladies' Night without sufficient notice for the more conservative members to object. Three censuring resolutions failed to pass, and the reception "proved to be very enjoyable." It

was attended by sixty-seven members and a "brilliant assembly of ladies." The following year, a motion that no ladies be invited was passed only after an amendment to strike the word "no", so that another successful Ladies' Night followed on April 29, 1878.

This pleasant custom persisted. Ladies' Night became an occasion for the embellishment of the club rooms, as in 1885 when there was a loan collection of paintings by "noted artists and unknown amateurs". The season of 1887-1888 included three Ladies' Nights. However, the best evidence of the deserved popularity of this tradition, with both members of the Club and their ladies, appears in the attendance. When the figures have survived, they always show more ladies present than members.

The "brilliant assembly of ladies" at the first Ladies' Night included a delegation from the Fortnightly, founded in 1873 as a literary association for women, "intended to be cosmopolitan, with the intellectual side dominant but not exclusive." For a brief period, commencing in 1877, The Fortnightly held its meetings in the rooms of The Chicago Literary Club. The reasons were strictly financial, to enable the Club to occupy additional rooms without increasing the fifteen dollars annual dues. The sharing was strenuously opposed by Edward Mason. Although Mr. Gookin graciously concedes that he "does not think the Club suffered in consequence", he states that "we all must sympathize with his feeling, though we must regard it as somewhat overwrought."

The benefits, accruing to The Chicago Literary Club from its new roommates, were more than financial. The ladies provided "sundry embellishments" to the rooms, including particularly a bust of Homer and a cast of a statue of Dante, both of which became permanent features of the club rooms, remaining long after The Fortnightly's departure. A lady's veil left behind, draped by the janitor over Homer's bust, provided the basis for a mock unveiling and is mentioned by Mr. Gookin (and the present writer) "to show how ready the members were in the early days of the Club to seize upon every opportunity for wholesome fun." *O tempora! O mores!*

On November 22, 1875, the Club first met in its own rooms, on the fourth floor of the American Express Building at what is now 23 West Monroe Street. Two rooms had been rented for $500 per year. It cost $1,552.87 to decorate the rooms with agreeable wall-

paper, soft grey-green in one room and blue in the other, and to furnish them with chairs and tables made to order in the "Eastlake Gothic Style." With dues at only $10 annually, the new rooms were financed only by postponing rent for three months until the collection of semi-annual dues permitted the payment of all bills and left the Club with a balance of $65.97. It was these rooms, enlarged and remodeled, at double the rent, that were shared with The Fortnightly.

In the spring of 1881, The Chicago Literary Club moved to new quarters on the fourth floor of the Portland Block, at the corner of Washington and Dearborn Streets, connected by a dumbwaiter to Kinsley's restaurant in the adjoining building. The new rent was $2,000 per year, and the annual dues had to be increased to $24. Carpets and draperies were made to order, and a large table was specially designed and built with a "circumvallation" of triangular receptacles to store periodicals. At this time, the Club's quarters were open to its members, not only for its meetings, but throughout the day.

After a year without a home, holding meetings in the banquet hall of Kinsley's restaurant, the Club moved into new quarters, with a ten-year lease on rooms, in the new building of the Art Institute, at Michigan Avenue and Van Buren Streets, since 1893 the home of The Chicago Club.[2] Although The Chicago Literary Club was incorporated on July 10, 1886, and the annual dues were raised to $30 (in addition to an entrance fee of $25 for new members), the Club was able to finance the furnishing of its new quarters only by the issuance of $5000 club bonds, bearing six per cent annual interest and payable in ten years. The bonds were placed with members of the Club and were all redeemed or presented to the Club before their maturity.

Pictures of these rooms survive. Homer and Dante in the reading room looked down on the circumvallated table, where readers had the benefit of a very ornate kerosene lamp. Against the wall were benches, cushioned in dark green corduroy. The assembly room was plainly furnished with many wooden arm chairs in a variety of styles. The rooms themselves were lofty, with columns and decorated ceilings, evidencing a distinct architectural personality.

2. A building designed by John Wellborn Root, like his partner, Daniel Hudson Burnham, a member of The Chicago Literary Club.

The location was not entirely convenient, for at the time the North State Street cars ran only to Lake Street, and taxicabs were unknown.

At the end of 1891, the Art Institute sold its building to the Chicago Club, without making provision for the remaining five years of the lease to The Chicago Literary Club. At the motion of James L. High[3], the club resolved to surrender its lease, provided this could be done "upon such terms as to save this club substantially harmless from any loss." The directors, presumably with Mr. High's guidance, were most successful, and received $10,000 from the Art Institute for surrender of the lease, despite "some feeling at the time that the Club had not been quite fair to such a worthy institution as the Art Institute and had insisted upon needlessly hard terms."

The Chicago Literary Club was fortunate to have some funds to finance the University Club in making extensive changes to its clubhouse on Dearborn Street, between Washington and Madison Streets, and thus to provide rooms for the Club, occupied from 1893 to 1906. The remodeling and decoration cost $20,000, half of which was the money received from the Art Institute for termination of its lease. The balance was a bequest to The Chicago Literary Club by John Crerar.[4] The quarters housed the Club comfortably until, toward the end of the tenancy, they became run down and "hopelessly dirty."

From 1906 to 1910, the Club occupied inadequate space in the Orchestra Building on Michigan Avenue, leased at an annual rental of $2900. After its bad experiences with dirty quarters, the Club hired Mrs. Mary Green, "a competent woman", as housekeeper, who kept the rooms well, and in 1924 was still "a most faithful and efficient servant." Apparently, the occupancy of these quarters was "pleasant despite the obvious fact that the rooms were not satisfactory."

On April 25, 1910, the Club moved into the quarters it occupied for the balance of its first half century. Those rooms, shared with

3. James Lambert High, president of the Club in 1888–1889, was a lawyer of high professional attainment, esteemed by several generations at the bar as the author of *High on Receivers*.

4. John Crerar, a native of New York, was a wealthy merchant, eminent in his lifetime and after his death for his philanthropies, including particularly his bequest to found The Crerar Library. Although he never read a formal paper or held any office in the Club, he regularly attended meetings and participated intimately in its life.

the Caxton Club, were located on the tenth floor of the Fine Arts Building at 410 South Michigan Avenue, only a few steps from the old Art Institute so inconvenient two decades earlier. Once again, the annual reunion and dinner could be held in its own rooms. The event was celebrated on October 10, with Merritt Starr's inaugural address, other addresses, and songs by the Imperial Quartet.

These rooms were the most luxurious yet occupied. In the reading room, Homer and Dante were still dominant, but surrounded by paintings and photographs, portraits of members of the club. The lighting had, of course, become electric, but with undistinguished and inadequate fixtures. On the floors were rugs of Oriental design. The furnishings were more modern, the chairs leather-upholstered, more handsome but perhaps not quite as companionable as the wooden ones of thirty years before.

Whatever quarters were occupied by The Chicago Literary Club, whatever social activities the members enjoyed, the focus of its life lay in the weekly literary exercises. During the first fifty years, 497 members participated in the delivery of 1632 papers or formal addresses, not counting 152 "Informals", "Conversations" and "Symposia." Although this prodigious literary effort represents participation by only 57% of the members, those taking part averaged more than three papers. During the first fifty years, twenty members gave fifteen or more papers each. The record was held by Clarence Augustus Burley, who was responsible for twenty-six evenings over a period of forty-five years.

Despite a general belief to the contrary, there were at least two occasions when papers were read by non-members. On February 8, 1891, Charles William Eliot[5] read a paper on "The Qualities and Resources of Harvard University." On October 31, 1904, Hiromichi Shugyo,[6] the Japanese Commissioner for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition held that year in St. Louis read a paper on "The Japanese Exhibits". Of course, such distinguished guests as Thomas Hughes, Matthew Arnold and Archdeacon Farrar[7] addressed the functions at which they were honored.

5. This is the gentleman whose secretary is reputed to have expressed regret to a caller, that "The President is in Washington consulting with Mr. Roosevelt."

6. The Commissioner was undoubtedly the personal guest of Mr. Gookin.

7. Frederic William Ferrar was archdeacon of Westminster. Subsequent to his lavishly catered reception at The Chicago Literary Club, when he would not eat and drank only ginger ale, he became Dean of Canterbury.

Many of the early papers were on topics remote from the professional experiences of the writers: a judge writing upon "The Resurrection", and a lawyer about "Pompey". The Club has always "left the essayist free to select his own subject and to express any opinion thereon that he may wish".[8] However, Brooke Herford, president of the Club in 1880–1881, asked every man to write on "The work in which he was most busily engaged." As a result (to mention the titles of a few papers whose writers should need no identification beyond their names) the club had the privilege of hearing Daniel Hudson Burnham on "The Lake Front", Lorado Taft on "Paris from a Mansard: Experiences of an American Art Student", Edgar Addison Bancroft (our Ambassador to Japan) on "Our New Foreign Policy" and Judge High on "Certain Tendencies in the Legal Profession." There were uncounted papers reminiscing about the Civil War.

There can be no question that many of the papers were extremely scholarly, even erudite. Some were perhaps dull. A good literary style was looked on with favor, and some members became renowned for their flowing periods. For the critical audience, one member tried too hard. One Franklin Denison, who presented "The New Epic" on December 3, 1877, a "feeble attempt at fine writing" lacking "both consistency and lucidity", was sued by his former law clerk for compensation in helping to write this paper. Mr. Denison never presented another paper, although it was twenty-four years later that he resigned from the Club.

The subject matters of the papers presented were not always bland. In 1915, there was a paper on "The Freudian Doctrine and Its Limitations." There were many papers on the labor movement. Despite the Victorian injunction that gentlemen discuss neither politics nor religion, there were many papers on each. The most controversial of all was presented on May 17, 1875 by Judge Henry Booth. His subject was "Evidences of the Resurrection Examined", and his conclusion that they were inadequate. Several clergymen and other members were greatly "grieved and incensed", regarding the judge as a misguided atheist. The discussion became so heated and acrimonious, that the chairman had to intervene and bring the meeting to an abrupt end. This incident

8. To quote Mr. Gookin's "passing" but unhistorical note: "No member is under compulsion to listen to any paper that he does not find interesting".

was the source of the rule that "no paper at the time it is read shall be open to adverse criticism in the club." Despite the resulting decrease in discussion, Mr. Gookin opined that "On the whole such loss as there has been has been fully compensated for by resulting harmony."

Despite the scholarship and literary skill evident in many of the papers, the most eagerly anticipated and gladly received were those of a humorous nature. We are told of the disappointment of the members and guests at Ladies' Night on January 31, 1887, when a paper by James Norton on "The Rise and Fall of The Devil" failed in its "untold possibilities of amusingly whimsical treatment" and was only a "scholarly performance entitled to serious consideration." The nature of the humor enjoyed at the Club can be deduced from two consecutive papers. Following the severe winter of 1900–1901, a "Report on Recent Explorations in the Sub-Polar Regions of Cook County, with Ethnographic Notes upon the Tribes Inhabiting the Mountainous Portions Thereof," illustrated with views, maps and specimens, by Frederick Greeley and Charles Gordon Fuller, was presented at the meeting held on April 22, 1901. The next meeting was Ladies' Night when Clarence Burley read "An Essay in Aesthetic Culture," illustrated with lantern slides from pictures drawn by two members of the Club caricaturing the titles of all the papers read or still to be read during the season. An illustrated catalogue was printed.

Wit, like champagne, loses its sparkle with the passage of time. Most of the literary epigrams quoted by Mr. Gookin are now too flat to be reiterated here, and he discreetly fails to repeat the "salacious tales" enjoyed by a former president. Today we must accept the humor of the past principally on faith.

It was not mere humor, but good humor, that was the key to the life of The Chicago Literary Club throughout its first half century. The Club did indeed hold to serious intellectual purposes. The papers presented demonstrated a high level of scholarly and literary endeavour. The functions of the club were well planned and served in quarters generally suitable. Many, but not all, of the members were eminent in the life of Chicago. Each had his foibles, some agreeable and some less so. Yet the earnest good humor of the members, and their enjoyment of each other, integrated them into one Club.

The Chicago Literary Club had many eminent members, but any exclusiveness it attained[9] was based on intellectual rather than on financial or social attainments. Major Henry Alonzo Huntington[10] has correctly stated:

Want of sympathy with mistaken philanthropy is, I think, the only indication of exclusiveness that stains the annals of the Club. To its membership poverty has been welcomed and wealth has been no bar . . . Too much stress cannot be laid upon these facts in our history, that no man was ever turned from our doors for any mean social reason, and that we have always been rich in poor men.

With five decades and more between us, we should not hope to characterize the spirit of the Club better than those who were then a part of it. Perhaps we should be best satisfied with Frederick Gookin's conclusions written fifty years ago:

"As we of the older generations look backward over the years that have gone, three things besides the excellence of the papers read stand out conspicuously. First among these is the remarkable strength of the attachment of the members to the Club, which has persisted from its earliest beginning until now and is undiminished today. Another is the large element of fun that made the early meetings so enjoyable. The third is the memory of the old familiar faces and figures of the fellow members we knew and loved. Strongly do I share the sentiment that Major Huntington expressed so beautifully when in his inaugural address as president, he uttered the words that each of us may well echo: 'That gallery, invisible to others, which like every man of feeling, I have built within myself, is illuminated tonight and the portraits painted are looking down upon me.' "

Our predecessors did indeed build upon a firm foundation!

PETER EDGE

9. Until 1881, the membership as a whole voted on the election of new members, three black balls being sufficient to defeat a candidate. Any man who openly aspired to membership was likely to be defeated. A certain degree of spite was present, as in the perhaps apocryphal remark, attributed to Judge Homer Nash Hibbard, that a certain candidate was a "learned man who always spoke in a dead language which he murdered as he went along." The situation soon abated, and at least two rejected candidates subsequently became presidents of the Club.

10. Major Huntington had distinguished himself during the Civil War by his bravery and his soldierly qualities. As of the time he was elected president of the Club in 1883, Mr. Gookin reported: "Among all our members he alone at that time was a gentleman of means and leisure."