



THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO

“THE CHICAGO FIGHT”

Mortimer Adler

Part 1 of 2

The friendship between Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler began in 1927 when Hutchins was dean of the Yale University Law School and, on the recommendation of C. K. Ogden, invited Adler, then a young lecturer in psychology at Columbia University, to come to New Haven and tell him what he knew about the relevance of psychology and logic to the laws of evidence.

Two years later—in April, 1929—Mr. Hutchins was named president of the University of Chicago. He was thirty and Mr. Adler, twenty-six. He promptly invited Adler to join him at Chicago.

*In his autobiography, *Philosopher at Large*, published this year by Macmillan, Mr. Adler recalls their first years at Chicago and some of the principal issues in what came to be known as “The Chicago Fight.”*

Following are excerpts from his account:

[October, 1929]

Bob and I spent an evening together at the Yale Club in New York. On that occasion, Bob confessed to me that, in his career so far, he had never given much thought to the subject of education. He found this somewhat embarrassing now that he was president of a major university. I had never ever given much thought to the subject either. However, I could tell him what had been the most important factor in my own education—the Erskine General Honors course at Columbia. Reading the Great Books, both as a student and as a teacher, I said, had done more for my mind than all the rest of the academic pursuits in which I had been so far engaged.

After I described how the General Honors course was conducted at Columbia, Bob asked me to name the books we read. I rattled off a long list of authors and titles in roughly chronological order, to which Bob’s response was that his own education at Oberlin and Yale had not included most of them. In a speech that he gave some years later, entitled “The Autobiography of an Uneducated Man,” he recalled that he had arrived at the age of thirty “with some knowledge of the Bible, of Shakespeare, of *Faust*, of one dialogue of Plato, and of the opinions of many semi-literate and a few literate judges, and that was about all.” Bob then went on to say that Mr. Adler had told him that unless he “did something drastic he would close his educational career a wholly uneducated man.” It was Bob himself, not I, who proposed the drastic remedy.

Though his proposal, which he communicated to me early in 1930, was originally designed to initiate the education of Hutchins and continue the education of Adler, it had much more far-reaching effects. It developed into one of the main parts of the program of educational reforms associated in the nineteen-thirties with his name and with the University of Chicago. Though John Erskine and Columbia had done the pioneering work ten years earlier, Hutchins and Chicago were to become, in the public mind, the promulgators and promoters of the “Great Books Movement” in liberal education.

In his inaugural address, delivered in November, 1929, President Hutchins recommended among other things, a “scheme of pass and honors work,” which would divide courses into large lectures and small discussion groups. The general and special honors program at Columbia, about which I talked to Hutchins again when I visited Chicago during the Christmas season, had obvious relevance to what Bob had in mind, and consequently he asked me to send him detailed information about the Columbia program. I did this in a

letter in which I warned him that “organized departments and departmentally minded individuals don’t understand it, resent it, distrust it” and that “specialized scholars think that it is pretentious, and that the work must be sloppy because it isn’t their type of scholarship.” Nevertheless, I urged him to adopt something like the Columbia honors program, especially the Great Books seminars, because, I said, “it is one of the strongest attacks upon specialism and departmentalism; it is the best education for the faculty as well as for the students; the use of original texts is an antidote for survey courses and fifth-rate textbooks; and it constitutes by itself, if properly conducted, the backbone of a liberal education.”

I would not have been surprised to learn of Bob Hutchins’ willingness to advocate the adoption of this program, but I was certainly surprised by a telephone call in which he asked whether I would be willing to teach the General Honors course with him the following September. We would, he said, take a select group of freshmen from the entering class and read the Great Books with them for two years—in the Columbia fashion, by discussing one book a week for two hours. He hoped he would prove as good a co-leader of the discussion as Mark Van Doren had been; he hoped that the introduction of this course in the college would be an opening wedge in an effort to reform the college curriculum; but, most of all, he hoped that reading and discussing the Great Books would remedy some of the defects in his own education.

Up to that point my acquaintance with university presidents had been limited to a remote awareness of the personality and posture of Nicholas Murray Butler at Columbia. The picture of a university president reading the Great Books with freshmen, for his own sake as well as for theirs, was as shocking as it was refreshing. When it was announced, without any reference to the Great Books, that Hutchins planned to teach freshmen the following autumn, a shock wave spread from the campus through the whole community. . . . The faculty and the general public had come to expect the unexpected, but this piece of news exceeded even that expectation.

Bob asked me to write a description of the course for insertion in the college catalogue. I sent him a statement twelve to fifteen lines long which he cut down to three lines, writing me that he had translated my statement into English and had forwarded it to the dean of the college. Under the heading “General Survey,” it was listed as follows: “110. General Honors Course. —Readings in the classics of Western European literature. Limited to 20 by invitation. This is a two-year course, one two-hour class session each week. Credit is deferred until completion of the course.” Chauncey Boucher, who was then dean of the college, found everything

about this venture disturbing. It was not only that the president had volunteered to become a member of his faculty; in addition, the course departed from the prevalent academic orthodoxy of full course credit being given each quarter for passing an examination in a course that met three times a week in fifty-minute periods and was taught by a single instructor. He was also troubled by the problem of selecting the twenty students to be invited to participate, eventually solved by my interviewing about eighty members of the entering class, chosen on the basis of their high-school records.

Teaching the Great Books with Bob Hutchins was the one fine experience that first year at the university. ... Distinctly different in his style from Mark Van Doren, my partner at Columbia, Bob, like Mark, was a witty interrogator of the students, catching them on vague or airy statements about the readings... .

Partly because I wanted Mark Van Doren, Dick McKeon, Scott Buchanan, and Stringfellow Barr to visit Bob Hutchins and me in Chicago, and partly because of my own experience with oral examinations in the General Honors course at Columbia, I persuaded Bob to invite my friends to come to Chicago as external oral examiners. Buchanan and Barr came from the University of Virginia in June of 1931, Van Doren and McKeon from Columbia University in June of 1932, to conduct a half-hour oral examination of each student in our class. They put the students on the spot in a way that was good for them, exposing the shallowness of their verbal chatter, full of clichés that had stuck in their memories, often in a fragmentary fashion. No written examination by instructors in a course, or even an oral examination by them, could possibly cut under the surface of students' answers to find out whether or not they really understood what they were saying.

John Barden, who as an entering freshman in 1930 joined the Hutchins-Adler Great Books seminar, became in his senior year editor of the *Daily Maroon*, the university newspaper. Both in its news columns and in his editorials, he advocated the president's educational program and criticized the faculty opposition, precipitating an intellectual tempest that swept over the campus from January to June in 1934. Hutchins, in his convocation address of December, 1933, had made a number of acerbic comments about the place of facts and ideas not only in the education of students, but also in the researches carried on by scientists and scholars. At the beginning of the new term, Barden reported the effect of this address in a story headlined "Hutchins Address Divides Faculty into Two Camps"; and if that was not true at the time, a succession of more inflammatory articles, which Barden wrote, succeeded in

producing a campus confrontation that aligned students and professors on opposite sides of the issue.

Day after day, the Letters to the Editor column carried answers to and defenses of Barden's criticisms, written by members of the faculty as well as by students. Professor Harry Gideonse, later president of Brooklyn College in New York, posted *Maroon* editorials on the college bulletin board with his own caustic comments; to which Barden responded by publishing a glossary "to aid those who criticize *Maroon* editorials," in which he instructed Gideonse and others on the meaning of such terms as general education, ideas, facts, propositions, principles, and theories. The running feud between Barden and Gideonse, together with heated exchanges between adherents of both parties—exchanges which occurred in classrooms as well as in locker rooms, cafeterias, and taverns—became the chief, in fact the all-absorbing, extracurricular activity at the university. Excitement about an intellectual conflict took the place of the usual excitement about athletic contests and made the latter look pallid by comparison.

My own involvement resulted from a challenge issued to me by Professor Anton J. Carlson, an eminent physiologist, who along with Gideonse, a social scientist, led the opposition. He had been particularly provoked by what he interpreted as slurs on the scientific method in the president's convocation address the preceding December, and which Hutchins repeated in his address to the faculty at the annual trustees dinner in January. What Hutchins said on both those occasions he had said many times before, but his earlier statements just did not happen to light the spark that set the tinder on fire.

As early as 1931, in an address to the graduating class, Hutchins had declared:

"Science is not the collection of facts or the accumulation of data. A discipline does not become scientific merely because its professors have acquired a great deal of information. Facts do not arrange themselves. Facts do not solve problems. I do not wish to be misunderstood. We must get the facts. We must get them all.... But at the same time we must raise the question whether facts alone will settle our difficulties for us. And we must raise the question, too, whether an educational system that is based on the accumulation and distribution of facts is likely to lead us through the mazes of a world whose complications have been produced by the facts we have discovered."

And a little later in the same address, which he entitled “The New Atlantis” because it was an attack on the scientific utopia envisioned by Francis Bacon, Hutchins declared that “upon the proper balance of fact and idea depends our eventual escape from the New Atlantis,” adding that he hoped the system of general examinations which had just been set up would “emphasize ideas rather than facts.”

The subsequent convocation address in December, 1933, contained remarks slightly more incendiary, such as:

“The gadgeteers and data collectors, masquerading as scientists, have threatened to become the supreme chieftains of the scholarly world.

“As the Renaissance could accuse the Middle Ages of being rich in principles and poor in facts, we are now entitled to inquire whether we are not rich in facts and poor in principles.

“Rational thought is the only basis of education and research. Whether we know it or not, it has been responsible for our scientific success; its absence has been responsible for our bewilderment. A university is the place of all places to grapple with those fundamental principles which rational thought seeks to establish.

“The system has been to pour facts into the student with splendid disregard of the certainty that he will forget them, that they may not be facts by the time he graduates, and that he won’t know what to do with them if they are.



“He doesn't know anything except facts.”

This drawing, done for Robert Hutchins in the early thirties by humorist James Thurber, is an obvious reference to one aspect of the “Chicago Fight”—facts versus principles—as recalled in Mortimer Adler’s new book.

“The three worst words in education are character, personality, and facts. Facts are the core of an anti-intellectual curriculum. Personality is the qualification we look for in an anti-intellectual teacher. Character is what we expect to produce in the student by the combination of a teacher of personality and a curriculum of facts.”

“The scholars in a university which is trying to grapple with fundamentals will, I suggest, devote themselves first of all to the rational analysis of the principles of each subject matter. They will seek to establish general propositions under which the facts they gather may be subsumed. I repeat, they would not cease to gather facts, but they would know what facts to look for, what they wanted them for, and what to do with them after they got them.”

When he came to deliver his address to the faculty at the trustees’ dinner a month or so later, Hutchins took note of the reaction that these remarks had aroused. Remarking that he had said such things repeatedly in earlier statements, which had been printed in the *University Record*, he added: “Were the editor of the *University Record* still alive, he would, I am sure, be grieved to learn that any of you were surprised at my remarks at the last convocation.” He then quoted appropriate supporting passages from eminent scientists and philosophers—Alfred North Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Stanley Jevons, Claude Bernard, and Henri Poincaré. But instead of leaving matters at that, he poured fuel on the fire he had lit by a series of *obiter dicta* about anti-intellectualism, which could not fail to antagonize the leading members of the faculty:

“An anti-intellectual attitude toward education reduces the curriculum to the exposition of detail. There are no principles. The world is a flux of events. We cannot hope to understand it. All we can do is to watch it. This is the conclusion of the leading anti-intellectuals of our time, William James and John Dewey.

“Anti-intellectualism dooms pure science; it dooms any kind of education that is more than training in technical skill. It must be a foreboding of this doom which accounts for the sense of inferiority which we find widespread among academic people.

“. . . the recognition that ideas are the essential elements in the development of a science . . . is a repudiation of the anti-intellectual position. The anti-intellectual position must be repudiated if a university is to achieve its ends.”

It should not be difficult to understand why these remarks stung and stunned the faculty at the university which, since its inception

and certainly in its heyday, had been dominated by the scientific spirit, by empiricism and pragmatism, and by the instrumentalism of John Dewey. The faculty response issued in a variety of documents—a speech by Professor Frank Knight, a widely respected economist, entitled “Is Modern Thought Anti-Intellectual?,” and a paper by philosophy professor Charles W. Morris entitled “Pragmatism and the Crisis of Democracy,” the latter published in a pamphlet series by Professor Gideonse. The controversy over facts and ideas, and intellectualism versus anti-intellectualism, spread from the campus to the city. Leading articles appeared in the *Chicago Daily News* under such headlines as “Hutchins Stirs University by Questioning Science as a Basis for Philosophy” and “Scientific Writers Challenge Dr. Hutchins’ Statement Fact-Finding Art Is Empiric.”

But by far the most dramatic confrontation on the issues occurred in February in a debate between Professor Carlson and me which took place in Mandel Hall, the university’s largest auditorium, jam-packed with both students and faculty, and with an overflow crowd seated on the platform behind the speakers. My friends admitted the next morning that, though I had not won the debate, neither had I lost it. I had gained enough friends and supporters for the president’s position to turn it into a draw.

The debate took place on February 9th. Its repercussions were scarcely over when less than a month later, John Barden published an “education issue” of the *Maroon*, which he introduced with this front-page statement: “Critically campaigning for the intellectual as opposed to the memorization approach to education, the *Daily Maroon* brings its three-month battle to a stormy close with today’s issue. . . . New Plan Syllabi for the four general courses are reviewed in other columns of this issue.”

All four of the reviews were written by seniors who, like Barden himself, had been students for almost four years in the Hutchins-Adler Great Books seminar. The faculty had every reason, therefore, to infer that the criticisms leveled by these students at the syllabi which they had prepared for the four New Plan survey courses had either been inspired by Hutchins and Adler or, to say the least, reflected indoctrination by them. Some impression of the tone and direction of these criticisms may be gathered from the headlines that Barden attached to the reviews:

“Humanities Syllabus Lacks Needed Accuracy” “Social Science I Presents Facts, Overlooks Ideas”

“Logic Missing in Physical Science Course Outline”

“General Biology Course Is Termed Biased, Partial.”

To top it off, Barden wrote an editorial that presented the vision of a college in the “utopian future” which would be the answer to “American mediocrity in education”—a college in which all the students would be engaged in the reading and discussion of great books, accompanied by tutorials in grammar, rhetoric, and logic. At the end of four years of such a program, the students, Barden concluded, would rejoice “that education for them had been philosophical, not scientific.”

Leading members of the college faculty as well as a substantial portion of the students in the New Plan courses were now drawn into the fight. In the ensuing weeks, what might be characterized as civil war broke out on the campus. The Hutchins-Adler student contingent engaged in public debate with equally vocal and vociferous representatives of the other side. Commenting on this debate, the *Maroon* declared: “To anyone who has had the privilege of reading Mr. Hutchins’ address, it will be evident that both philosophically and rhetorically he has said the last word on education as well as the first.” It also opened its columns to the opposition by publishing rejoinders to the earlier critical reviews, which charged the critics with being dogmatic, making unsupported statements, deifying the infallible Aristotle, and aiming to constitute themselves a new Inquisition. In addition, in mid-April the *Maroon* published an editorial written by Professor James Weber Linn of the English Department, who dismissed the whole controversy by saying that “the belief that such discussion is particularly important is characteristic of the inexperienced and immature. . . . In education, ‘principles’ are of little importance in comparison with people.” Barden could not let that pass without a comment that verged on insult. “Those who have taken courses in the personality of Professor James Weber Linn,” he wrote, “will realize the inevitability of his editorial.”

The winds of doctrine that swept across the campus were by now approaching hurricane velocity. On April 21, the College Curriculum Committee drafted a resolution on the educational objectives of the college, which they submitted to the faculty for adoption. I quote from it only the passages that must be read in order to appreciate the way in which the battle lines were drawn:

“The University of Chicago has been characterized by its devotion to research and its sense of responsibility to the community. . . . Its attitude has been at once scientific and humanistic.

“Certain of the criticisms which have been made concerning the present college program are related and coherent expressions of a common metaphysical background and basis. They grow out of the acceptance of a thoroughgoing rationalism, a commitment to the Aristotelian-Thomist realist view of *universalia in re* . . . They postulate as orthodox a belief in a rational soul engaged in abstracting eternal and unchangeable ideas from experience... .

“We believe that any form of rationalist absolutism which brings with it an atmosphere of intolerance of liberal, scientific, and democratic attitudes is incompatible with the ideal of a community of scholars and students, recognizable as the University of Chicago. For over forty years the university has led a distinguished existence without being officially committed to any single system of metaphysics, psychology, logic, religion, politics, economics, art, or scientific method. To follow the reactionary course of accepting one particular system of ancient or medieval metaphysics and dialectics and to force our whole educational program to conform thereto, would spell disaster. We cannot commit ourselves to such a course.”

The college faculty adopted the resolution as drafted by the Curriculum Committee.

Published in *The Center Magazine*, X, Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, September-October 1977, pp. 50-60.

OF INTEREST

Center member, Jerry Dampier has authored another novel, entitled *The Downfall and Rise of Steven Leroy Zienner*

To purchase, go to:

<http://www.authorhouse.com/BookStore/BookStoreSearchResults.aspx?SearchType=smpl&SearchTerm=dampier>

About the book:

Steven Leroy Zienner is a hard-working, hard-driving, hard-headed, economic materialist. Money, because of the influence it has over people and because of the things it buys, is the highest value he places on life. Unrestrained ambition in the pursuit of accumulating large profits, Mr. Zienner believes, lies at the heart of success and, at the same time, he believes wealth is the key to complete happiness.

As a result of his genius in the affairs of business, (that, and the willingness to exploit his employees to maximum effect) Mr. Zienner became a multimillionaire before his 30th birthday. The story takes place in the 1950's in Cleveland, Ohio; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Paris, France.

At this point, it should be noted that this story, *The Downfall and Rise of Steven Leroy Zienner*, is not merely a story about a man's company, or the products that he sells, or even his rise from humble beginnings to wealth and privilege.

It is a story about a choice a person ultimately makes between personal growth or self destruction when faced with personal tragedies and financial ruin. It is about the stubbornness as well as the willingness to see different points-of-view; *it* is about the desire to live in accordance with certain values and principles, or the lack thereof; it is also about the importance of family and friends; and the discovery, examination, and triumph over some of the most unattractive and malevolent elements within human nature. **All-in-all, it's about a man's downfall; but more importantly, his struggle to rise in the pursuit of the ethics of Happiness.**

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.