



GREAT MEN OF THE GREAT BOOKS

George McElroy an alumnus, remembers what it was like to read the Great Books with Adler and Hutchins—and how the two legends prompted Chicago's professors to think anew about why and what they taught.

Last summer, [2001] an obituary for Mortimer Adler immediately took me back to the spring of 1932. I was finishing my sophomore year at U-High, part of the University's Laboratory Schools, when I got a blue slip—a summons—to go to one of the bigger classrooms.

This was standard practice; every time someone in psychology or education at the University had a theory he wanted to try out, some of us were summoned to be tried out on. Once I was lowered, segment by segment, into a tank of water and then, after I was dried off, given an IQ test. It turned out we were the material for William Sheldon, Jr. (PhD'26, MD'34)'s theory of body types and were astonished at how well all the types—endomorph, ectomorph,

and mesomorph—in his book *The Varieties of Human Physique* (1940) fit us, until we realized they were us.

Another time I found myself peering through a large slit in a cardboard contraption, with lights inside shining up while I read something on a strip opposite. Later I discovered they had been photographing our eye movements as we read, leading to the conclusion that fast readers took in a half-line or line at a glance, slow readers one word, the slowest one letter. This discovery led both to teaching kids how to read with whole words on flash cards and reading-skills programs that trained eyes to take in more at once.

This time there were no contraptions. I saw most of my friends there and realized later that about the top quarter of the class had been summoned. Mr. Davey, our class adviser, introduced the two dozen or so of us to a slender, dark-haired gentleman named Mr. Adler, and told us we were to have the option of substituting for our required third- and fourth-year English courses something called “Great Books” with Mr. Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins, the University’s president. Mr. Adler explained that we would read a book a week and meet for a two-hour discussion with himself and President Hutchins every Monday afternoon. They would merely ask questions; we were to find the answers. We would have keys to Classics 18, which had been made into a Great Books reserve, where we could go to read. We would have Harper Library cards. And, we learned later, at the time when we would have had English on our daily schedules we would have an hour to read in a classroom. We were also to write a weekly, two-page paper on any idea we had about the week’s book, submitted to the classroom teacher who oversaw our reading.

Most of us agreed, excited at the prospect of taking the same course that Adler and Hutchins offered to students in the College. We thought we had grown up fast—the more so the following fall when we sat around the long table in Classics 18 and found ourselves, for the first time in our lives, addressed as “Mr.” and “Miss” by no less than the University’s president.

Never were swollen egos so quickly deflated. We had been supposed to start with the *Iliad* but Hutchins could not make it that week, so we had it and the *Odyssey* together. Adler had told us that he tended to go around the table calling on students, while Hutchins preferred to go down the class roll. The first name Hutchins noted was Dick Cragg.

“Mr. Cragg,” said Hutchins, “there has been some discussion as to whether these two books were written by the same person. Do you find them alike or different?”

Dick’s newly grown Adam’s apple bobbed. “Well, they both have a lot of fighting—someone’s always crashing someone over the head.”

“Then,” asked Hutchins, his right eyebrow cocking in what we came to know as his devilish—amusement warning (he had wrinkles slanting up over that eyebrow from its frequent use), “Mr. Cragg, when you pick up a book and find that, in this book, Soldier A ‘crashes’ Soldier B over the head, you exclaim, ‘Ah, this is Homeric!’?”

I can’t recall the exact sequence of questions thereafter, but after most of us gave up on authorship we went on to form. It’s an epic, someone said. “What is an epic?” Well, it’s a long poem. The next year Adler and Hutchins got a girl to decide that up to 24 stanzas a poem was a lyric and after that it was an epic. But if our class avoided that trap we fell flat on “What is a poem?” I think someone said it had poetry in it. “What is poetry?” We stumbled around, but at the end of two hours none of us could make any important statements or explain what it meant.

We felt less grown-up. But we spent weeks trying out definitions of poetry on each other, which was of course the whole idea.

Going in the next few weeks from Homer to Herodotus to Tacitus to Plato to Athenian tragedy and comedy made us feel like citizens of old Athens; we knew our way around. Then we found ourselves ruining Christmas vacation by slogging through Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Poetics*; if I made it through five pages an hour I was pushing it. Those works really did require revisiting, for which the schedule had no time. Next came another shock: the Bible.

Hutchins began by saying that he and Adler “take the position that the Bible is inspired.” The rules of combat precluded our asking what it meant to be “inspired,” even had anyone thought to do so. But most of us were pretty much free thinkers, as Hutchins and Adler expected, and we spent two hours trying to disprove the idea with no success. Much later I realized we’d had our first memorable lesson in a basic logical axiom: You can’t prove a negative (or, Why anyone accused of a crime must be presumed innocent until proven guilty—he can’t be required to prove he is not guilty since that is usually impossible).

Hutchins liked to play such games, often asking some unusually tricky question and then leaning back and blowing eloquently perfect smoke rings while a student floundered. But when Hutchins was absent, Adler could not always inhibit the urge to tell us the Truth.

I was used to arguing, often successfully, with teachers (in one course, I'd gotten four questions in a 12-question "objective" quiz thrown out as ambiguous). So I bet Bill Stevens (elder brother of Justice John) a soda that by year's end I would run Adler up a logical tree. I lost. In losing I was rather obstreperous, and there was a day when Hutchins and Adler leaned on me quite painfully. Adler had brought the class to agreeing on a point I objected to but didn't have a ready argument about, and I evidently showed my frustration. Adler said, "Mr. McElroy made a face!" Hutchins responded, "Let's see if there is anything behind that face." I still did not have a ready argument.



We stopped on Thomas Aquinas for three weeks while Hutchins was away. Skeptic as I was (and am), I apparently found Thomistic logic fascinating to follow, and I got enough into it that when Adler met my parents at a reception he gave me his ultimate accolade—that I had once made an argument worthy of Aquinas. I have no idea what. When Hutchins returned and one of us made an assertion that sounded a bit Thomistic, he said amusedly, "I'm afraid you've been indoctrinated."

At the end of the first year we took the same final the College students did: writing on ten out of 15 excerpts from books we had read, to identify and comment on in relation to the whole work, with a week to work on the essays at home or in the classroom. There was also an oral exam in which we went in pairs before any three of an imported examining board—Stringfellow Barr, Scott

Buchanan (who with Barr became the chief architect of the Great Books curriculum at St. John's College in Annapolis), novelist Thornton Wilder, and Arthur Rubin—who asked wide-ranging questions. My proudest academic accomplishment is that, paired with Bob Brumbaugh, AB'38, AM'38, PhD'42, later Yale's Plato and logic expert, I got an A on the oral and he got an A-. I still have Hutchins's congratulatory note.

But the important thing was, as Adler wrote in his autobiography, although younger than the College students, “the high school students did just as well; in fact, having had less schooling, they were less inhibited in discussion.” I'd say that it was not that we'd had less schooling but that we'd had U-High schooling, which encouraged independent questioning and expression.

By the next year our ranks had thinned to about a dozen. Meanwhile, ten or so members of Hutchins and Adler's first Great Books class in the College had said when they finished that they thought they had learned to read and now would like to do it over again, to get more out of the books. So we high-school seniors were combined with these College seniors. They of course had more to say than did we, but we were not intimidated and said a good deal, though not the warm Halloween night when an egg sailed through an open window, barely missing a very startled Adler. In the winter I developed rheumatic fever and was kept in bed for six weeks, missing a reportedly lively session on Hume when one of the older students wore a hat with “Empiricist” stuck in the hatband and did his best to represent the Scottish philosopher against Adler's contempt.

I had not kept up with the reading while in bed and did not need the credit to graduate, but I did finish the year's readings and was much impressed when Hutchins, exercising his right as head of the University to which we were a part, appeared in full cap and gown to hand us our diplomas. As we filed past he made friendly little remarks to those he knew, though my nerves were so taut I never heard what he said.

I had to wait till after a year at the University of Arizona, at my doctor's suggestion, to retake that second year, in a class Hutchins found so mediocre he would not set up an examining panel for it. When we came to discuss *War and Peace* he simply asked how many had read it; I and a few others held up our hands. He noted that I had had two years to read it, said that was not enough of us, and dismissed class. Several of us adjourned to Leah Spielberg

(AB'39, AM'40)'s dorm room and had a lively enough discussion on our own.

In those days if one had registered for the basic three College courses one could add others gratis and, if one liked, take an R ("Registered") for no credit and no prejudice. For another two years I would add Great Books, giving me the right to sit in when I wished. One night, just after Hutchins had come back from confronting Red hunters in the state legislature, I attended the discussion of *Paradise Lost* and the *Aeropagitica*. I came in late and instead of my usual position at the end of the table found myself in the only vacant seat, next to Hutchins. I had flaming red hair in those days beyond recall, and when Hutchins sat down and glanced at me, he exclaimed, "Mr. McElroy-Banquo's ghost—shake not thy gory locks at me!"

Then he asked me to state the *Aeropagitica*'s argument for free speech and press. I did, and he, deadpan, said, "Now, Mr. McElroy, you don't really believe that, do you?"

I gasped and gurgled and said that of course I did. For an hour and a half he took the position that free speech was a danger to society, and we all hammered away at it. He didn't quite fight fair: every time I stated a preliminary or two to an argument, he jumped on the preliminaries and I never got to the argument. Only half an hour was left for *Paradise Lost*.

But the next year, in a session on Shakespeare, Hutchins (loosening up from the "questions only" rule) pointed out that if a tragic hero is to fall with any probability from happiness to a misery which, despite any tragic flaws, is unmerited, he has to encounter either a villain, as in *Othello*, or an impossible dilemma, as in *Oedipus*. It seemed obvious once he said it, but I had not thought of it that way.

A very different session was Adler on Hume. Adler told us the one reason he looked forward to retirement was that he would never again have to read Hume. When years later his disciple John van Doren wrote a history of philosophy, Hume was not in the index. Adler's method was to ask what Hume said about something, point out that on page so-and-so Hume said something else, and ask, "How do you reconcile the two?" The proper answer was, "I can't."

At the time I did not know enough to make sense of this, but Norman Maclean, PhD'40, told us later that during the year I was at

Arizona, Richard McKeon, a friend of Adler's from Columbia, had come to the University as a visiting professor (he stayed on as dean of humanities). Norm took him along when Hutchins and Adler were to do Hume, saying there was always quite a scene. McKeon watched Adler's hatchet work for about half an hour, then jumped in and reconciled the quotations Adler had cited. After class Adler came up to him and asked, very angrily, "What do you mean, coming into my class and defending Hume? You know Hume can't be defended! Don't you ever do that again!"



Later I took courses with McKeon and with Ronald Crane, who insisted there were several courses of reasoning, so that much intellectual combat was often, as an old-time Chicago professor once put it, a head-on collision between two trains running on parallel tracks.

For Adler, however, the deductive method of Aristotle and Aquinas was the only valid one. McKeon told us, with a devilish gleam in his eye, that the problem for Aquinas, who took Aristotle to be "the Philosopher," was that in Aquinas's time only the deductive *Prior Analytics* had been translated, not the inductive *Posterior Analytics*. Adler seriously told us that it was impossible for two intelligent arguers to really disagree. One should say "I don't understand what you mean" or "You are uniformed" or "You have been misinformed"—and get these aberrations remedied. Then the two must agree.

But if Adler's *How to Read a Book* was really how to read just one kind of book, his ever-questioning mind had one effect for which I, and many of my classmates, should be thankful. As Hutchins's provocateur general he set up meetings with leading professors to

ask them what, precisely, they thought was their subject and what, specifically, they wanted their teaching to accomplish. His meeting with the English department started hot discussions, eventuating in the conclusion that their subject was reading and writing. Therefore, the bachelor's examination, and key courses leading to it, should concentrate on what students learned how to do on their own, in reading and analyzing good literature and in writing about it. Not the substance they had been taught in class but the methods they had learned.

So the department set new requirements for graduation: students had a reading list of about 70 titles, many not taught in any course. Before taking the exam proper we had to pass a preliminary exam in history of English and American literature. But the final exam, the one that counted, was four three-hour sessions. Two each were on three or four works from the reading list; the other two were open book, with very searching questions, on two books advertised well in advance, an intellectual text and an imaginative one, that had not lately been taught in any course. With Maclean's high-pressure course in poetry and criticism as the best preparation and Crane supervising the exam questions, English became, from one year to the next, one of the University's intellectual hot spots.

Thanks to Adler's provocation. **Salut.**



George McElroy, AB'38, AM'39, graduated from U-High in 1934, retired from teaching English at Indiana University Northwest, and is working on a book about Edmund Burke in India. He is a lifelong Hyde Parker and correspondent for the College Class of 1938.

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