



**Dr. Adler in 1977 with his new autobiography**

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## DROPOUT

**Mortimer Adler**

**1 of 2**

Reading the *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill at the age of fifteen while in the editorial office of the old New York *Sun* led me to the discovery of Socrates; and this, in turn, formed my early resolution to try to become a philosopher. Though I had not completed high school, I managed to get into Columbia College, where, a year after I entered, John Erskine introduced a course of readings in the great books of Western civilization. That series of fortuitous circumstances, with the addition of one more accident, equally benign, set the stage and pointed the direction for all that subsequently happened in my life. Not quite all, perhaps, but all that belongs to the record of work done and things accomplished.

More than fifty years after my reading of Mill's *Autobiography*, I spent a year in London with my wife, Caroline, and our two boys, Douglas and Philip, aged eleven and nine. The house we lived in during that year was only a few blocks away from Kensington

Square, tree-lined, with a fenced garden in the center, and with rows of modest houses on three of its four sides. On the front wall of one of these houses was a plaque bearing the following inscription:

JOHN STUART MILL  
1806—1873  
*Philosopher, Lived Here*

I do not know whether Mill wrote his *Autobiography* in that house, but if I were to pick out a single book which changed the direction of my life, that would be it. The account Mill gives of his own education—an education that involved no schooling at all—sent me back to school; or rather, made me want to go to college, although I was ill prepared to do so. Since I had dropped out of high school, after only two and a half years, at the age of fourteen, I could hardly satisfy the entrance requirements for college.

Until I read Mill, working on the *Sun* fulfilled the only ambition of my youth. As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a journalist, not a teacher, scholar, or philosopher. It was that drive which, by a circuitous route, brought me to Mill, and it was Mill who put an end to that drive.

At the beginning of this century, the New York public schools were already becoming overcrowded. To relieve the congestion, the authorities allowed bright children to skip grades. Benefiting from this policy on three occasions, I was graduated from P.S. 186 in upper Manhattan at the age of twelve and a half, and I elected to go to De Witt Clinton High School, one of Manhattan's liberal arts secondary schools.

Only one teacher really held my attention during my first year there—Garibaldi M. Lapolla, who taught freshman composition. Perceiving my fledgling aspirations to become a writer, he volunteered to help me learn how to write. He told me how Flaubert had trained de Maupassant by making him write the same story over and over again until, in Flaubert's judgment, it was stylistically perfect. He proposed that we try the same procedure. My task was to write a single-page description of any object I thought worthy of the effort; he would blue-pencil it; I would do it over and over again until the Maestro said, "Well done." I chose a city fire hydrant as the object to describe, and describe it I did, at least twenty times before Mr. Lapolla laid his blue pencil down.

Among the extracurricular activities at De Witt Clinton High

School were two student publications, the *Magpie*, a monthly magazine, and a weekly newspaper, the *De Witt Clinton News*. I had been editor of the school paper at P.S. 186; so, early in my first year at high school, I submitted short stories for the magazine and tried out for the staff of the newspaper. Success in these ventures diverted my attention from studies and schoolwork, even to my cutting classes to spend more time on journalism. I wanted to be a journalist, not a scholar, and here was my opportunity to get ahead fast. Before the end of my second year, I became editor of the *Magpie*, and by the beginning of my third year, editor of the *News*. I probably did enough schoolwork to maintain the requisite grades, but my memory of those days is vague on the classroom side, while rich and vivid about my journalistic efforts.

With this division of my attention and energies, I might never have finished high school anyway, but my demise as a student came about for a different reason. The principal, an old-time martinet by the name of Francis H. J. Paul, ordered me to suspend a student from the staff of the *De Witt Clinton News* because his grades were below par. My overblown opinion of my importance in the local scheme of things blinded me to the fact that I was running only the school newspaper, and that he, not I, was running the school. I disobeyed his order and kept the failing student on my staff, continuing to publish his pieces in the paper; but I didn't cover my tracks to prevent the faculty supervisor, Mr. Biggs, from rummaging through my desk and uncovering plain evidence that I had disregarded the principal's command. I didn't know that Mr. Biggs had given the principal the *corpus delicti* when I was called into his office. I lied brazenly and then, when presented with the evidence, sheepishly confessed my guilt. The punishment—suspension from all extracurricular activities. No more work on the *News* and the *Magpie*, just studying and going to classes, which I had been doing less and less. I couldn't face it. I persuaded my parents to let me drop out of school and go to work. They were hard-pressed enough financially to agree to let me take out working papers (I was under sixteen) and find a job.

Going to work meant only one thing for me—a return to journalism. To do this I was quite willing to forgo finishing high school. But how? On a newspaper as a copyboy, of course. Which newspaper? That was determined by an earlier event in my life.

While still at P.S. 186, I had entered an essay competition sponsored by the New York *Sun* for students in the city schools. Napoleon was the subject. My delight in winning the second prize in my age group—a silver medal with Napoleon on one face and the

colophon of the New York *Sun* on the other—turned a little sour when I learned that my closest friend, Malcolm Sanger, also aged eleven, had won first prize and a gold medal. But when it came to getting a job as copyboy on the New York *Sun*, the silver medal, which I exhibited to the personnel manager of the newspaper, had the charm of gold. I got the job, and it was better than I might have hoped for, because it was not in the City Room where my hours would have been four to midnight, but in the editorial rooms on the daytime shift.

Taking handwritten copy from the desks of the editors and sending it by rope-controlled dumbwaiter down to the composing room, and then, when the bell rang, taking galley proofs from the dumbwaiter to the desk of the editor in chief, Edward Page Mitchell, hardly satisfied my desire to become a big-time journalist. After all, I had been editor in chief of my own newspaper at De Witt Clinton. Since my copy-running duties did not consume much time, I filled my idle hours by writing an editorial each day and boldly laying it on Mr. Mitchell's desk, as I did those written by the three editorial page writers. For some strange and lucky reason, my desk in the outer office had the only typewriter in the editorial department; so Mr. Mitchell did not have to decipher my scrawl.

Day after day, editorial after editorial, I waited for Mr. Mitchell's buzzer to summon me to his desk to take my typewritten copy to the composing room. Each night, after he went home, I rummaged in his wastebasket to see if he had deposited my contribution there, but no typescript of mine was in the basket, either crumpled or torn up. Much later I discovered all of them banded together in a bottom drawer of his desk, but at the time I could not imagine what became of them. I therefore kept on persistently, since I felt that my whole future was at stake. On about the twenty-fifth day, the heavens opened up and the highroad to success was bathed in sunlight. There on the edge of Mr. Mitchell's desk lay an editorial of mine, copy-edited and initialed by Mr. Mitchell for typesetting. My hand trembled as I picked it up, my legs felt watery, yet instead of taking the easy way of sending the copy down to the composing room by dumbwaiter, I walked down the stairs cradling it in my hands all the way. The editorial, entitled "In 99 Years," celebrating the ninety-ninth anniversary of the crossing of the Atlantic by the S.S. *Savannah*, argued for the renewal of subsidies for the merchant marine, a subject about which I knew little and cared less. All that I knew about the matter had been learned by an hour's diligence in the library of the editorial department.

Shortly thereafter, Mr. Mitchell's secretary was drafted for the

American Expeditionary Force to France. Having discovered that I could typewrite and that I had read proof on my high school newspaper, he moved me from the outer to the inner office as his secretary, in which post I typed the letters he wrote out in longhand, read the galley proofs for the editorial page, and did other odd jobs, such as getting his lunch every day, which consisted without variation of one bottle of milk and one Swiss cheese sandwich bought at the Automat across the street, together with five Bock panatela cigars, his daily quota. Not content with performing these secretarial duties, I undertook to write verse for the editorial page, and also the little paragraphs that filled up the third column when the last of the editorials fell short of the bottom of the page.

My pay as secretary to the editor in chief of the *Sun* was five dollars a week, a raise from the four a week I had been paid as copy-boy; but at the rate of fifty cents for each editorial paragraph, twenty-five cents a line for verse, and at space rates of seven and a half dollars a column length for other editorial matter and for book reviews for the Sunday literary supplement, I managed to average, at age fifteen, thirty to thirty-five dollars a week—an enormous sum in those days. My parents felt that my weekly contribution to the family income more than justified their decision to let me drop out of school and go to work. What was left of my earnings each week I spent on gallery tickets for Broadway shows and on books I bought at Brentano's—mainly plays by G. B. Shaw, Lord Dunsany, and John Galsworthy, my heroes at that time.

Clearly, I was moving up the ladder of big-time journalism, with no obstacles that I could see to an early realization of my fondest hopes; but, with an overdose of ambition and an absurd degree of impatience (Mr. Mitchell once told me that I should not try to strike all twelve numbers on the clock at once), I decided to accelerate my advancement by attending night classes in the Extension Division of Columbia University—not because I wanted to remedy my deficiencies in schooling, but solely to improve the tools of my trade as a writer. I chose a course given by Prof. Frank Allen Patterson in Victorian literature, and that was the start of my undoing as a journalist.

We read the poetry of Browning, Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Walter Savage Landor, the essays of Hazlitt and Lamb, and the *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill. I read that book as I had never read any book before. The infant Mill had been tutored by his father, James Mill, and his father's friend Jeremy Bentham almost as soon as he was out of the cradle. When he was only three, he could read Greek, and by the time he reached five he had

read the dialogues of Plato and could distinguish, so he said, between the tricks of the Socratic method and the substance of the Platonic philosophy. At five! Here I was fifteen, almost sixteen, and I had never heard of Plato before, or Socrates for that matter, and I certainly could not make their acquaintance in Greek. The list of books that young Mill read under his father's tutelage between the ages of seven and eleven included many of the books that John Erskine had assembled for a special honors seminar that I was to participate in four years later when I reached my junior year in Columbia College. But not only had Mill read many of the great books in the Western tradition before the age of eleven; he had, from that point on, over the next two or three years, edited his father's *History of India* and Jeremy Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*.

At one point in my life I knew Mill's story almost by heart; for I had to read it with maximum attention to details when, as a young instructor at Columbia College, I was asked by the University Press to prepare an index for a new edition. Indexing, I discovered early on (and have found it amply confirmed ever since), raises the skill of reading to the highest level.

Reading Mill's *Autobiography* sent me in search of Plato. Luckily, I did not have far to go to find him. He was right next door, in the apartment adjoining the one in which I lived with my parents on Washington Heights. Next door to the Adlers lived the Feldmans. Sam Feldman, an immigrant Russian Jewish lawyer who held the office of Public Defender in the Borough of Manhattan, was an inveterate book buyer and had educated himself by reading a wide variety of the many books he bought. Some he just liked to look at and admire—even, as I know from my own experience, to feel a certain power over, just by having them in his possession. On his overloaded shelves stood a set of President Eliot's *Harvard Classics*, which included some of the dialogues of Plato. I borrowed the volume and turned first to the *Euthyphro*, a short dialogue on piety. Within a few days I had read several more—the *Apology*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Crito*. By that time I had become so fascinated by the Socratic method of questioning that I persuaded my friends to engage in mock dialogues that would allow me to exercise my skill as their Socratic interrogator.

This I found to be much more fun than writing editorial paragraphs for the *Sun* or correcting galley proofs. As the intellectual excitement in this new vocation grew, my interest in the old one waned.

Dissatisfied with the incompleteness of the selections from Plato in

the *Harvard Classics*, I bought a secondhand set of the Jowett translation in five volumes and began to spend time at my desk at the *Sun* reading the dialogues of Plato instead of doing the work that earned my weekly paycheck. This could not go on for long unnoticed. One thing or another, which I no longer remember, precipitated my decision to abandon journalism and try to go to college—perhaps to become a philosopher, but certainly to read more books that might move my mind the way reading Plato had.

At the time I made my decision to leave the *Sun* and try to prepare myself for entrance to college, Mr. Mitchell was on vacation. I wrote a letter to Harold Anderson, chief editorial writer under Mr. Mitchell, explaining my intentions. “You have acted wisely,” he replied; “you were undertaking to do too much with your work in this office and your studies. Anybody who can give all his time to study should do so. . . . You will, of course, call on Mr. Mitchell on his return and explain the situation to him, for I know he will want to see you.”

The two years or more that I spent on the *Sun* did more for me, I am sure, than completing high school and going on directly to college could have done. If it did nothing else, it broke the routine of uninterrupted classroom attendance year after year, with the likely consequence of disinterest and boredom. But it did more than that. After being out of school, I looked forward with eager anticipation to serious study at college. I wanted to go to college for the only reason which, in my judgment, justifies embarking on that venture—to study just for the sake of learning and for no utilitarian or adventitious purpose to which the learning might be put to use. I had had my fill of extracurricular activities in high school and had experienced the drudgery of daily chores on the several jobs I held between high school and college. Getting into college meant being able to devote all my time and all my energy to study.

In addition, I learned on the *Sun* how to do not only a full day’s work, but also a full week’s work. I found that the task of writing came easier if performed every day of the week. Taking Sunday off—everyone worked six full days in those benighted times—made it more difficult to get back into the swing on Monday; so I formed the habit of going down to the office on Sunday and doing a full day’s stint even though I was not paid for doing it. The habit of working seven days a week served me well in the short time I had to get ready for the college entrance examinations as well as during my three years at Columbia. The night courses I had taken in Columbia Extension made it possible for me to enter college with advanced standing, skipping the freshman year entirely and

starting as a sophomore.

I wish I could say that the academic hiatus—the years of earning a living between high school and college—had also helped me to achieve a maturity that I have recently claimed would be achieved. I may have matured in certain respects as a result of going to work, but the evidence is depressingly ample that I had not become emotionally mature by the time I entered college. The fact that, during three years as an undergraduate, I devoted *all* my energies to study would, I suspect, in anybody's mind, be evidence enough that I remained emotionally immature. And emotionally immature I remained for many years thereafter—not only during the years that I was a member of the faculty of Columbia University, from 1923 to 1930, but also to a serious extent during the greater part of the twenty-two years I held a professorship at the University of Chicago. That, however, indicates a defect in my own makeup rather than in the educational theory I have gradually developed.

Chapter 1 from his autobiography, *Philosopher At Large*.

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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