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William Hocking's former home in Chocorua, New Hampshire

THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE THIEF

Trespassing in the library of a dead genius

John Kaag

Dozens of times over the past four years, I've made the drive from my home in Boston to a long-forgotten library in the middle of New Hampshire, accessible only by dirt road and hidden behind White Mountain pines. It once belonged to William Ernest Hocking, the last great idealist philosopher at Harvard, and though it contains irreplaceable volumes, it was known until recently only to a few of Hocking's relatives and one very fastidious thief. And me.

I had come to Chocorua, New Hampshire, in 2009, to help plan a conference on William James. But I'm not a particularly dedicated philosopher and in general bore easily, so I soon found myself elsewhere: specifically, considering the virtues of the Schnecken at a German pastry shop. And this is where I found, browsing the scones, a man of ninety, wiry and sharp, who introduced himself as Bun Nickerson. Nickerson moved slowly, like most old philoso-

phers do, but unlike most old philosophers his hobble wasn't a function of longstanding inactivity. Instead, he explained, it was from farming and professional skiing.

I'm normally hesitant to say what I do for a living—"I teach philosophy" is often prelude to awkward silence—but Nickerson found my profession intriguing, because he'd grown up in a little house on a corner of a philosopher's land. "Doctor Hocking's land," as he put it. Today, philosophers have arguments, office hours, books, articles, committee meetings, and the occasional student. Few of us have "land." Nickerson made Hocking's sound impressive and permanent, like the proper realm of a philosopher king: one stone manor house, six smaller summer cottages, two large barns, and one fishing pond with three beaver hutches, all situated on 400 acres of field and forest. Most seductively, Nickerson mentioned a library. Getting to see it struck me as a very good reason to skip out on my conference-planning responsibilities, so I climbed into Nickerson's pickup and we bumped our way up the hill.

Contemporary academics, as a rule, don't have personal libraries worth talking about. They leave inboxes, not archives. And so they avoid a problem that nineteenth-century intellectuals faced in the twilight of their lives: What to do with an intellectual home after it's permanently vacated? One solution is donation to a large institution. But when this happens the books are lost among the millions in the stacks, reorganized in a homogenized Library of Congress categorization that permits the easy finding of any particular book but destroys the unique integrity of the collection. To avoid this fate, writers would often give their libraries to like-minded friends and students. Some were lucky enough to place their entire collections with universities like Harvard. But William Ernest Hocking and his son Richard, despite repeated attempts, failed to be this lucky.

Born in 1873, William Hocking spent his teenage years in Joliet, Illinois, working odd jobs as a mapmaker and illustrator before entering Iowa's College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts (now Iowa State). Like many American philosophers, he didn't initially intend to become one. He wanted to practice engineering. And this was his plan until the late 1890s, when he read *Principles of Psychology*, by William James, who hadn't wanted to be a philosopher either. By the time Hocking read the Psychology, James was well on his way to founding a school of thought known as American pragmatism. Pragmatism holds that truth is to be judged on the basis of its practical consequences and its ability to enrich human ex-

perience. James's pragmatism was just grounded enough to convince a would-be engineer that philosophy wasn't a complete waste of time, and Hocking began studying philosophy at Harvard in 1899. He was one of the last students to work under the "Philosophical Four": William James, George Herbert Palmer, Josiah Royce, and George Santayana, some of whom would later leave him their books. By the end of his life, Hocking, an avid collector, had acquired more volumes than he knew what to do with. He kept them in a non-winterized library in New Hampshire. After he died, his treasures were left to the mice and porcupines of the White Mountains.

When Nickerson and I showed up, the Hocking library was abandoned. He explained that members of the family still spent time on the land, particularly in summer, but this was a brisk fall day. The library was a small stone house in the Arts and Crafts style, fronted by French doors and covered by a steeply sloping roof with two chimneys. I peered in through the glass and was immediately reminded of the opening scene of Goethe's Faust (one of Hocking's favorites, I later learned), in which Faust, surrounded by well-thumbed books, laments the fragility of human knowledge. In the words of a depressed William James, "All natural goods perish. Riches take wings; fame is a breath; love is a cheat; youth and health and pleasure vanish."

I wanted nothing more than to go inside, but I'm sure I wouldn't have violated Hocking's sacred space without permission had it not been for the *Century Dictionary* that I could see through the window. First published in 1891, the *Century Dictionary* was regarded by the critic H. W. Henshaw as "the most conspicuous literary monument of the 19th century." It was a masterpiece of lexicography, running more than 7,000 pages. Some of the best minds in America had worked for years on this first edition, including one of the founders of American philosophy, C. S. Peirce. I'd always had a certain fascination with Peirce—the kind that makes you write a doctoral dissertation, and then, after the dissertation is finished, write a book on him. The son of a Harvard mathematician, Peirce had picked up his brother's copy of Richard Whately's *Elements of Logic* at the age of fourteen and breezed through. Despite being trained as a chemist and geodesist, Peirce would consider logic and metaphysics his lifelong calling. His papers in the Journal of Speculative Philosophy in the late 1860s would set the contours for American pragmatism for the next three decades. Dewey, James, and Royce all looked to him for inspiration and guidance; James tried to get him a permanent job at Harvard, but Peirce, a master of self-sabotage, foiled his friend's

attempts. Peirce never managed to fit in. He was always meddling, often quite effectively, in other people's research. So he found part-time employment more suited to a polymath: writing entries for the Dictionary on astronomy, logic, mathematics, mechanics, metaphysics, and weights and measures.

I'd never seen a *Century Dictionary* before. I looked around for Nickerson, but he'd slipped off over the hill to revisit one of his old haunts. This isn't breaking and entering, I thought. When doors are unlocked, it's just entering.

Such rationalizations were probably akin to the thoughts of another man, a close relation to the Hocking family. This fellow had entered the library one day in February of 2007, while high on heroin, and proceeded to steal several hundred rare books—among them the first impression of the first edition of Hobbes's Leviathan, published 1651—which he shipped to his home address in Berkeley, California. Apprehended a year later, he told investigators that he had stolen the books in order to demonstrate to the family the importance of taking better care of them. But as the haul was worth more than a quarter of a million dollars, and as some of the books had already appeared on eBay, the law reached a different conclusion. The man went to jail, where I was not inclined to follow him.

Trespassing was easier than I could have imagined. The Dictionary's cover was original—tan leather that had taken on a dark patina over more than a century of use—and the front page confirmed my suspicions. 1891. First edition. The pages were surprisingly brittle for a book just over 100 years old, a fragility born of enduring many seasons of freezing temperatures followed by warmer spells. Thawing out isn't something books do with a great deal of grace. I took a look at a few random entries—"maid-pale," "maid-servant," "maieutic"—just enough to remember that this was a relic of a bygone age. I wondered which entries Peirce had written, since none of them were signed.

I looked at the shelf above the dictionary, at a long set of leather-bound volumes: the Journal of Speculative Philosophy, where Peirce had made his mark. It was the first run of the complete set, from 1867 to 1893. I wanted to see Hocking's signature, so I slipped the first volume out. But it wasn't Hocking's name at all. In tight, compulsive script was written, "Charles S. Peirce." As a pragmatist, I am highly suspicious of transcendence. But on that day, surrounded by the remains of philosophy, I began to believe in the reality of the unseen, in the sorts of things that James describes in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. I began to believe

that it was possible to come into direct contact with a reality that was long gone.

I spent the rest of the afternoon discovering James's copies of Berkeley, Hume, Nietzsche, and Plato, most of them signed in a sprawling hand, "Wm. James." Edmund Husserl's signed copy of the *Cartesian Mediations* was being used as a doorstop (this little gem, if sold at Christie's, could put one of my students through a year of university). And at the end of the day I ventured into the attic and discovered a letter from Walt Whitman to one of the Hockings' relatives, John Boyle O'Reilly. This material was priceless and irreplaceable. And then there were the merely expensive volumes: first editions of Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, as well as Hegel, Kant, and Malbranche. When I returned a year later, the most valuable item in the collection turned up: a first edition of *Two Treatises on Government*, without a name on the title page. Locke had initially published it anonymously.

Over the course of the next three years, the granddaughters of William Ernest Hocking allowed my colleague Carol Hay and me to lend a hand in saving the books. The rarest were moved to off-site storage. Today, most of the volumes are kept in a room in the archives of the O'Leary Library, at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. It's isolated, but at least it's dry, warm, and rodent-free. I hope it doesn't remain isolated for long. UML is a small but up-and-coming school, and, thanks to the Hocking family's generosity, it has unexpectedly acquired a rather large cache of philosophical masterpieces. I visit often to see them, under fluorescent lights. It always makes me a bit sad. I still think of the books in New Hampshire, just as I first found them—priceless but vulnerable, a bit like life at its best. I no longer have to trespass to see them, but some unpragmatic part of me wishes I did. 🕮

John Kaag is working on a book on the Hocking collection, which will be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the spring of 2015.

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