

**A TWENTY-MINUTE HISTORY
OF THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB**

(Presented November 28, 1960)

by

EARLE A. SHILTON



**THE CHICAGO
LITERARY CLUB
1998**

EARLE ASTOR SHILTON

Earle Astor Shilton was born on January 29, 1891, in Kewanee, Illinois, the son of a dry goods merchant. He attended the University of Chicago, where he was chosen University Marshal in his senior year, and graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in 1916. Following service in World War I as an army artillery officer, he practiced law for a short time in Montana. He returned to Chicago in the 1920s where he enjoyed a successful career in real estate.

Mr. Shilton was a member of The Chicago Literary Club from 1932 until his death in 1968. He served as chairman of the Publications Committee in 1941-42 and as president of the Club in 1944-45. He was also chairman of the Committee on Rooms and Finances for eleven years. He presented fifteen papers to the Club. Two of them were published: *God's Country*, a Ladies' Night Address, presented March 31, 1941, and *Boots, Shoes and Notions*, presented November 22, 1954.

His obituary in the Club yearbook for 1968-69 states that he died in his sleep on March 4, 1968, after an evening at the Club.

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FOREWORD

A *Twenty-Minute History of The Chicago Literary Club* was presented to the Club on November 28, 1960. It was one of three papers read that evening at a Book Night led by Alexander J. Isaacs. Mr. Shilton's paper is not listed in the Club's centennial volume, *The First Hundred Years*, and was brought to the attention of the Anniversary Committee by members of the Club who had been reviewing Club papers and archival materials at The Newberry Library.

By his own account, Mr. Shilton intended his paper for the "younger members" of the Club, who were presumed to be less familiar with its history. While he does not purport to be comprehensive in his *Twenty-Minute History*, he has covered his subject in an informative and entertaining manner, relying mostly on the early histories of the Club but also occasionally drawing on his own personal recollections.

It occurred to the Anniversary Committee that this paper would be enjoyed by old and new members alike and that it would be appropriate to publish it in revised form as a part of the Club's celebration of its 125th year.

Clark L. Wagner
Chair, Anniversary Committee

September 1998



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My assignment, to cover eighty-six years of the life and doings of The Chicago Literary Club in twenty minutes, must, of necessity, be an exercise in brevity, condensation, elimination, and a certain sleight of hand.

My remarks shall be addressed largely to the younger members of this society, since I am certain that most of the elder are well acquainted with all that I shall say, having read the two remarkable histories of the Club—the first, by Frederick William Gookin, published in 1926, covering the fifty years from the founding of the Club in 1874 to the year 1924, and the second, by Payson Sibley Wild, published in 1947, covering the twenty-two years from 1924 to 1946, inclusive.

These two histories of our Club are remarkable documents not only because they give a complete record of all papers given and published and all officers and members since our founding but also because they are replete with personal reminiscences of the members and also reflect upon the stirring times through which our organization has survived. In the year 1944, when I became the president of the Club, I discovered in an unused and heavily locked

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bookcase in the Fine Arts Building some fifty copies of the Gookin history, each in its container and ready for mailing. These were the remainder of the first printing of two hundred fifty copies by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, and were dust-covered and forgotten. Word was immediately sent out to the membership to come and get a copy, and within two or three weeks the supply was exhausted. I am reliably informed that every public library in this city has these books, including the university libraries, and I recommend to the newer members of the Club a journey to those original sources.

It is difficult to say just when a club is founded. Is it at the time of the first meeting of the organizers, the date of election of the first officers, or the adoption of the constitution and bylaws? If it is the first, then our Club was founded on March 13, 1874 at the old Sherman House in Chicago. Present at that meeting were the Reverend Robert Collyer, later to become our first president (the gentleman whose oil portrait adorns our Club premises each Monday night); the Reverend John C. Burroughs; Judge Henry Booth; Reverend Dr. Horatio N. Powers; John M. Binckley; Edward G. Mason; and, finally, one W. J. Leonard—seven in all. Mr. Leonard came “just for the ride”; he hoped to sell some lithographing services, and that prospect having faded, he never appeared again. So we may say that there were six founding members, half of them being clergymen. Somehow, in these materialistic days of 1960, our membership seems to possess a lesser percentage of the “cloth.” On April 14, 1874, a constitution was adopted, and on April 21 of that

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year occurred the first election of officers. I believe that we may now affirm that our lovely ship had been launched and we were on our way.

But there is a *bar sinistre* upon our fair escutcheon: there is a faint record of an earlier Chicago Literary Club. *The Chicago Business Directory of 1858* records a Chicago Literary Club meeting in the rooms of the Bryant and Stratton Business College with Lester L. Bond, lawyer, as president, one W. L. Perkins as secretary, and A. S. Seaton, treasurer. Nothing else is known of this organization except for Gookin's cryptic comment that it perished with the outbreak of the Civil War. Eighty-six years having passed, we need fear no suits for name copyright or claims of bastardy.

Speaking of the Civil War, it is difficult for us at this date to realize that our Club was founded in the close atmosphere of that terrible conflict. But a glance at the early membership rolls shows that we partook quite largely of the "high brass" who were but nine years removed from active service. I have found six generals, four majors and one colonel in the list, as follows: General Alexander Caldwell McClurg; General Joseph Bloomfield Leake; General George Washington Smith; General Joseph Dana Webster; General William Emerson Strong; and General Martin D. Hardin. Of these generals, Webster was Chief of Artillery at Shiloh and became Grant's chief of staff; he was also the government engineer who raised Chicago twelve feet out of the mud and installed our first comprehensive sewage system. General Hardin lost an arm at the Second Battle of Bull Run. Majors were Joseph Kirkland, William Eliot

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Furness, Henry Alonzo Huntington, and Henry H. Belfield. The one colonel was Huntington Wolcott Jackson. All of these army officers were enthusiastic and constant members of the Club and contributed greatly to its strength in the early years. A glance at the early programs of those years indicates that these military men could and did write of their experiences, and as we approach the centennial of that war, it is regrettable that at that time, and in fact until recent years, no file was kept of the weekly Club papers. The practice of filing copies of all papers with The Newberry Library was inaugurated by Stanley Pargellis, who joined our Club in 1947.

Luckily for The Chicago Literary Club, it had a sort of "wet nurse" in its beginning in the person of Dr. William F. Poole, who was elected a member at its first regular meeting held March 31, 1874. Dr. Poole came from Cincinnati, Ohio, where he had been a member of the famous Cincinnati Literary Club founded in 1849. It is reported that the Cincinnati club is second only in age in the United States to the famous Boston Literary Club. Dr. Poole brought with him the constitution and bylaws of the Ohio club, and our early laws and customs were fashioned largely from the practices of that older organization. Over the years, our Club has maintained a tenuous connection with the Cincinnati Literary Club, and at one of its anniversaries, several of our members bore our greetings to that older society.

In the beginning, the vexing problem of membership arose; one ambitious soul appeared with a list of some fifty prospects which included all the millionaires and men of

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social prominence in Chicago. This was tactfully sidetracked but still the problem remained. It was solved by laying down a few simple principles which seem to have endured through the years. First, the man must have a literary bent; he must be a good fellow and companionable to the group; and, lastly, he must be expected to contribute. A survey of the past membership for these eighty-six years shows, of course, many men of wealth, but that has not been a criterion. Major Henry Alonzo Huntington probably best expressed the long view of our membership when he said, "No man was ever turned from our doors for any mean social reason, and we always have been rich in poor men."

Now we come to the first Annual Dinner, held June 15, 1874 in the "ladies' ordinary" in the Sherman House Hotel. There were no ladies present and would not be for some years to come. In fact, when it was first suggested that there be a night when ladies should be invited, there was great and violent objection by many members: this was a men's club and should be kept inviolate and so forth. Perhaps the Civil War genes were still showing; anyway it was not until October 29, 1877 that the ladies appeared upon the Club scene. But to return to the first Annual Dinner. I should like to quote from Gookin's history as to that memorable occasion.

At eight 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

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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.

This was followed by the address of the evening, given by President Collyer. I shall quote just a few sentences to illustrate the difference between the rotund utterance of that time and our simpler phrasing of today. I quote:

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. *And in these decadent days when the finer flowers of literature have been largely submerged in a welter of rapacious greed and luxurious living, it may not be unprofitable to let our thoughts turn backward for a moment while we contemplate that enthusiasm. The need for a like stimulus is apparent when on every hand we hear men say that the agonizing events through which we have lived in the last decade have made it almost impossible for them to think of or to care for literature or art, or to turn their minds to things eternal when temporal things are so insistently engrossing.* [Words in italics are actually Gookin's]

Since the days of Collyer, our Club has passed through two world wars and the Truman police action in Korea and our historians have commented sadly upon those periods but

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without quite the agony expressed by our revered first president.

Came the year 1887 and we were incorporated; we were now a corporation not-for-profit organized under the laws of the State of Illinois, but the time was to come when the department of revenue of the national government was to question our status as a tax-free organization, and it would require the skill of a George Gale to satisfy Uncle Sam that we were indeed a cultural body and thus permit us to indulge in the purchase of common stocks and reap the returns therefrom without dividing them with the spenders in Washington.

But to go back to the year 1881, when for the first time an electoral committee was instituted. Before that date, on the fourth Monday of each month, all members were made a committee of the whole to pass upon applications for membership. The sponsoring members and seconders made appropriate speeches and then the fun commenced. The ballot box must have held a shower of marbles for every member present was supposed to vote. It became most difficult to get any new applicant past the entire membership without the possibility of two black balls appearing in the box. There were times when the chairman would announce, "I see no white whatsoever," and it became a sort of game to see if it were possible to get anyone past the gate, and in one whole year out of thirty applications, but four were successful. Chicago was a small city then and almost every applicant was known to several of a large membership and unfavorable comments were bound to be made. Then

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the strategem was adopted of balloting at the conclusion of the discussion over many applicants, in the hope that some of the acidulous comment would have been forgotten. When this failed, the device of an electoral committee was adopted and has worked successfully down to this day.

You will note that these meetings were held the fourth *Monday* of the month. But Literary Club meetings were not always held on a Monday. For the first two years, they were held on a Saturday night and the date was changed to Monday in June of 1876. About ten years ago when we had been ousted from the Fine Arts Building and were offered the second floor of the Crerar Building (a most admirable and convenient space, provided we would shift our meeting night to Tuesday), the membership was canvassed for its opinion as to changing the meeting night. The opposition to any other night than Monday was practically unanimous, and it is probable that for decades and for centuries Monday will be the time of meeting.

At about the date of the founding of our first electoral committee, in order to encourage attendance, a most pleasing custom was started—that of serving a “collation” to all members. The nature of this free-will offering has never been expressed, but we are told that “the wine flowed freely.” This lovely custom has persisted to our time. During the years under the Volstead Act, the liquid refreshment was of the “dry” variety, but in 1933 our beloved Payson Wild began serving us a few “blends,” thereafter followed by the bonded variety, and now it must be 100 or 86 proof according to whether you choose bourbon or scotch. Many of us

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still recall one feature of the old days under Mrs. Mary Green, who from 1906 to about 1946, almost forty years, was in charge of our collation. This was her boiled coffee settled with an egg. Out of this fifty-cup pot of granite iron came a draught fit for the gods, and only Mrs. Green could fashion that delicious brew.

The Chicago Literary Club was not without its inward troubles. At this late date it seems strange that one of the earliest difficulties had to do with our Club name. Several members felt that the name The Chicago Literary Club with the emphasis on the *The* was a supreme arrogation of literary omniscience by one small group in this large city. The leader of the objectors was member Edward G. Mason, who proposed that the Club be called The Marquette Club in honor of the famous Jesuit missionary, the first "literary" man to reside in Chicago. The members did not seem to be impressed with the literary qualities of Marquette and proceeded to suggest the following names for member approval: The Club, The Chicago Lyceum, The Kinzie Club, The LaSalle Club, The Sphinx Club, The Lawrence Club (in honor of the then president), The Illinois Club, The Thackeray Club, The Monroe Club (the club rooms were then on Monroe Street), The Garrick, The Lotos Club, The Irving Club, The Chicago Radical Club, The Open Ballot Club, The Great American Excelsior Club, The Miralac Club, The What's In a Name Club, The Club Which Is Too Modest To Say What It Is, The Belles Lettres Club, The Goodenough Club, The Amateur Club, The Brown Club, The Indian Club, The Club for the Aggregation and Fostering of Old Citizens

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Regardless of Qualification, and, finally, The Marquette Eye and Ear Infirmary. The last was enough to kill the opposition.

Beginning with the very early days of the Club, a custom was inaugurated that persisted until the year 1915 and now has been all but forgotten. This was the practice of entertaining distinguished world literary figures at a banquet in the Club rooms. The first of these was held on November 3, 1874 to commemorate the eightieth birthday of the poet William Cullen Bryant. The guests for the evening were two of the poet's brothers, who resided in Princeton, Illinois, Arthur and John Bryant. It happens that I knew these Bryant gentlemen, who for many years conducted the Bryant Orchards near Princeton, some thirty miles east of my home town.

In 1880 the guest at a special banquet was Thomas Hughes of the famed *Tom Brown at Rugby* stories. He was introduced by our president, Brooke Herford, who evidently recounted the names of all the characters in that famous book, only to hear from the author this response: "Gentlemen, I confess to you that I had quite forgotten the names that have been recalled to me in the language of the gentleman who has just welcomed me to your hospitality."

In 1882 the guest was Francis Seymour Haden, a famous educator. In January 1884 it was Matthew Arnold, and it was after this occasion that the great *Tribune* hoax occurred, undoubtedly engineered by a member, Franklin H. Head, of whom you are apt to hear more this evening. Some years later, in 1899, an English member of Parliament visited the Club (his name is not given in the history) and on his return to England wrote as follows to the press: "The most ex-

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traordinary and remarkable thing in this remarkable city [Chicago] is that I have participated in the exercises of a literary club in which there is not a single literary man." This might have chilled the ardor of the proponents of banquets for visiting Englishmen, particularly since at that moment the Club membership included three editors of Chicago newspapers and a half-dozen freelance writers whose work was being published monthly in American magazines. But the idea died a slow death, as witness the last such banquet held in May 1915 in honor of George Macauley Trevelyan, the distinguished author of impressive histories including a definitive work on Garibaldi. There is no record of his impressions.

This seems to have been the last of the special dinners except for the notable Octogenarian Dinner given by our then president, Henry M. Wolf, on March 11, 1935 at the Woman's Club on 11th Street in honor of the six then-living octogenarian members of the Club. Of the six, five were present, Joseph Adams being at the time incapacitated in Florida. This was a remarkable occasion and I was fortunate to be among the guests. It is indeed impressive to read the names and dates of birth: John J. Glessner, born 1843; George E. Dawson, 1847; Joseph Adams, 1851; Frank J. Loesch, 1852; Frederick W. Gookin, 1852; and Charles S. Cutting, 1854. Of these six men, three died within a year and one within thirteen months; the other two lived for eight and nine years, respectively. There was a response from each of our five notable guests, and e're they had finished, the audience had become aware that spread before

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them was a panorama of two great epochs of American history, the epoch of pre-Civil War American settlement and that of the scientific and industrial development following that conflict; these men had bridged that gap, and we were their fellow club members and sharers of their broad and amazing experience. It was a never-to-be-forgotten evening, and it is doubtful if in any of our future history, such an event can be duplicated.

But it was not all "beer and skittles" in the olden days of the Club. There were certain crises, one of which led to the passage of Section 3 of Article VII of the Bylaws, which reads as follows: "The Club, as such, shall express no opinions on religion, politics, social science, political economy, or any other subject. It shall not, by vote, endorse or condemn any paper that may be read or views that may be expressed by any member. No paper, at the time it is read, shall be open to adverse criticism in the Club." This declaration of free speech should satisfy even the World's Greatest Newspaper. All this came about because of a founding member, Judge Henry Booth, who, on May 17, 1875, read a composition entitled *Evidences of the Resurrection Examined*. His conclusions seemed to be that the evidence in favor of the resurrection was somewhat inadequate. Now you will recall that one-half of the founding fathers were clergymen, and it is a fact that many more ministers of the church had joined our society in its first years. Also, that was the day of the fundamentalist in religion. Booth had but finished his paper when several clergymen leaped to their feet and, as rapidly as they could be heard, roundly denounced his conclusions. The discus-

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sion became acrid and bitter and threatened to end the existence of the organization at that very moment. At the succeeding meeting, Section 3 came into being.

There has been a tradition in the Club that never, in the eighty-six and more years of our history, has any speaker failed to show up at the appointed hour to deliver his paper. I have seen many a program chairman sit with beaded brow, nervous wrist and palpitating heart as the witching hour approached, but never have I beheld a failure in this regard. But our Gookin history does record one instance, in the year 1876, when this shocking event occurred. As the fatal minute passed, the president calmly announced that the audience would constitute a committee of the whole to discuss a subject which he then propounded, and for the ensuing hour, the discussion proceeded without let or hindrance and the meeting was successful. Let us pray that this long-ago event does not reoccur in these precincts!

On our platform tonight is the witness [the Collyer portrait] to a spectacular event in our history. The Literary Club had a fire! It occurred April 25, 1904 in the Club rooms, then in the University Club at 116-18 South Dearborn Street. The fire started in a dumbwaiter shaft and the premises seemed to be doomed. Our valiant member Irving K. Pond hastily seized the portrait of Robert Collyer that always graces our meetings and carried it to a saloon across the street, where it reposed the night. The fire was extinguished with little loss to the Club, but the ornate frame of the portrait was sadly cracked and was only repaired two years ago when the portrait itself was restored. Collyer's por-

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trait had been painted by one Percival de Luce in 1882, depicting Collyer at the age of 59. The portrait in our possession is a copy made by the same artist in 1897 and presented to the Club by Collyer in the same year. According to our late Payson Wild, the podium at which I stand is also a gift from Dr. Collyer and came from his first church in Chicago about 1874. I know that it is ancient, because it had to be reconstructed a few years ago following years of our own wear and tear and the hard usage lent it by occupants of these quarters other than ourselves.

The history of a club is somewhat the history of its wanderings. Our own precious society has always been seeking to plant its roots in some permanent location, but considering the growth and changes in the Loop area and the financial resources of a loose organization such as ours, it is no wonder that we have been harried from pillar to post to find suitable quarters that would satisfy the transportation requirements of a membership that extends from the far north suburbs to the far south side and includes the western suburbs as well.

We started in the Sherman House; were six years in the American Express Building on Monroe Street; five years in the old Portland Block at Washington and Dearborn; one year at Kinsley's Restaurant (long defunct) on Adams Street; five years in the old Art Institute Building (site now of the Chicago Club); a total of fifteen years (at different periods) at the old University Club on Dearborn Street; four years in the Orchestra Building on Michigan Avenue; at the Fine Arts Building at 410 South Michigan Avenue

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from 1910 to 1929; then to a most disasterous experience at 185 North Wabash for two years; thence back to the Fine Arts Building until being more or less ousted about 1950, when we took up our domicile at 84 East Randolph Street for a couple of years just above the Fish and Chips Restaurant where our dining members quickly tired of fish and chips. About six years ago, we moved into our present quarters [the Lake View Building at 116 South Michigan Avenue], which are centrally located, have the virtue of a room unimpeded with pillars, are without competing noises from other occupants, have a relatively low rental, and, a thing hard to find in the Loop, a usable kitchen and storeroom for our records.

We can hardly divorce the history of a successful literary club from its finances. We have tried to keep our dues low lest we make it impossible to keep within our membership the man to whom high dues would be a hardship. It is interesting to note that the yearly dues in 1877 were ten dollars, that they were raised in 1881 to twenty-four dollars, in 1886 to thirty dollars, and in 1957 to thirty-five dollars. Our dues pay for about one-half of our yearly expenses, the rest comes from income on investments that were made from gifts. The principal gift, of \$10,000, was left to the Club under the will of John Crerar and another of \$1,000 under the will of Joseph Adams. Another member left us \$500 for the purchase of a library, which long ago was sold. Once upon a time the Art Institute paid the Club \$10,000 for cancelling a lease that had three years to run. On the other hand, our Club once financed the University Club with a loan of \$20,000 when that organization was moving from

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Dearborn Street to its present location. And at one distant time, the Club floated a \$5,000 bond issue among its members to secure furnishings for its first quarters.

In the early days, the Club had rather elaborate and exclusive quarters. Sometimes it had a suite of four or five rooms—a club room, library, card room, dining room and so forth. While rents were low by today's standards, the Club sometimes paid as much as \$2,900 a year for exclusive space; we now pay \$1,200 a year for shared quarters. Down the years we keep hearing the suggestion that we use our capital for the purchase of our own building to have an exclusive literary club where all men of like kidney may repair and enjoy the atmosphere of an ancient English coffee house, a Dr. Johnson/Boswell sort of place. That was tried once in the old Portland Block, and suddenly the officers found that one of their members, an impecunious lawyer, was using the club rooms for the practice of law. I once belonged to another club in Chicago that flourished amazingly for ten years until it went into the real estate business and died within the year.

I devoutly hope that The Chicago Literary Club will keep simple; that George Gale will continue to keep us from the clutches of a jealous revenue department; that we will keep our dues low and our investments conservative, in order that men who love things literary may continue to meet on Monday evenings and share in the world of the spirit, denied us elsewhere; and that we always may be "rich in poor men."