

The Centennial Year and After

PAYSON SIBLEY WILD began his book on the Chicago Literary Club by saying "Fortunate is the historian who has lived through and been a small part of the history he essays to write." The present chapter might well open with the comment: "Unfortunate is the historian who hopes to live through and be a small part of the events about which he writes—but has not yet done so." An inexorable deadline demands that these words go to the printer before the centennial program year has scarcely begun. Therefore it is necessary to write chiefly about expected delights, not those which have already occurred.

At the start of the year, nine members had had a tenure of more than half a century. Six of them—Henry Porter Chandler, William Ludlow Chenery, Henry Brewster Freeman, Jess Dean Harper, Robert Elden Mathews, and George Francis Whitsett—are now, to the regret of Chicago members, no longer resident in the city. The other three are active and are making significant contributions to the Club during this year.

The program for 1973-74 began with a splendid centennial banquet on October 8, the 3,267th meeting of the Club. After dinner, four toasts were given. The first, delivered by the 100th President, Thomas Boal, honored the newest member of the fifty-year group, Ernst Wilfred Puttkammer, who was presented with a plaque attesting to the affection and thanks of all the rest of the members of the Club for his many years of service to it. He responded with a warm and sensitive statement of what membership had meant to him. A second fifty-year member, Morris Fishbein, then toasted in verse the first century of the Club's existence, recalling particularly some of its earlier giants and suggesting that:

"No doubt on Monday in some heavenly hall
They still assemble to the Monday call."

The next toast, to the second hundred years, was given by Arthur A. Baer, Chairman of the Centennial Committee. The final toast, given by the current president, honored all his predecessors in that office.

By long-standing convention, the addresses given at the meetings of the Club are called "papers" but literary purists (of whom the Club has a bountiful supply) would define them as "essays." It seemed appropriate, then, for the address at the banquet to be devoted to this literary form and particularly to its creator, Michel de Montaigne. This program was followed at the first of the regular meetings by an account given by Franklin C. Bing of the founder of the Club, Robert Collyer, at whose portrait the members gaze during every meeting. And so the year proceeded, each evening destined to be graced by a speaker, some of them veterans in the annals of the Club, others making their first presentations, and most of them using obscure and enticing titles. These sessions would be crowned, as always, by Ladies' Night, this year's occasion being viewed with especially keen anticipation because the paper is to be given by Williard L. King, the third of the resident fifty-year members and a man renowned for his previous essays.

Meanwhile a very special event is scheduled for February 1 when the Club celebrates its Centennial by a gala party held jointly with The Fortnightly, whose own first hundred years were honored by a joint meeting with the Club last year. This meeting will be particularly felicitous since it is to be held at the magnificent mansion which is now occupied by The Fortnightly but was formerly the home of Bryan Lathrop, who joined the Chicago Literary Club on January 3, 1876, and remained a member until his death on May 13, 1916. On two occasions, he served as Chairman of the Committee on Rooms and Finance; both times it fell to his lot to find new premises for the Club. He would take keen pleasure in knowing that one of the major occasions of the Centennial Year will be held in his own home, whose distinguished architecture has caused it to be designated by the national government as a Historic American Building and by the city as a Chicago Landmark.

Nobody could say with confidence how long the Club will survive in this kaleidoscopically changing world, but there can be no

doubt that its members take great satisfaction in both the pleasures of its present and the traditions of its past. Unlike some other associations, the Club has a firm control over its own destiny with resources to sustain its activity, with an active and concerned membership, and with the sure knowledge that every generation will produce men who wish in congenial company to look beyond their immediate duties to share in ideas which lie outside the customary concerns of their lives. The never-easy task of the Club is to find such men and weave them in a self-renewing fashion into a social fabric which has lasted for one century and might well endure for many more.

"I propose a toast," said Arthur A. Baer at the Centennial Dinner, "to the second hundred years of the Chicago Literary Club. The pattern of dedicated interest in ideas contemporary and timeless, by men of wit and humor and intelligence, played against a background of tradition in behavior and form, has been a rich experience for the members. What better wish for the future than a continuation of what has been enjoyed and relished, a conscious shelter from the furious winds of change! Raise your glasses to the second century of the Chicago Literary Club, not forgetting best wishes to the chairman of the Bicentennial Committee, whoever he may be."

He has probably not yet been born, but when, in due course, he comes to the time in which he must discharge his duties, (at the 6,534th meeting), the words (and the example) of Arthur A. Baer can sustain and guide him and his fellow members of the Club. The same fact is true of those who attend the 9,901st meeting of the tercentenary, the 13,068th meeting of the quatercentenary, the 16,335th meeting at the quinqucentenary, and all the later meetings in the future, so long as the Club shall last.

CYRIL O. HOULE