

# The Last Word

Memories, insights, and reflections

## History Lesson

A tall, erect gentleman emerged from an office and walked briskly across the Maxwell School lobby. The tilt of his black homburg and the forward thrust of his Malacca cane suggested a visiting professor from Cambridge or Heidelberg. As our paths crossed, I noted a twinkle in his eye and a bemused expression that indicated a slightly cynical view of the world.

Following this distinguished figure was the saddest looking of all that melancholy breed, the basset hound. I knew that I had encountered the legendary William Park Hotchkiss and Mable.

A native of rural western Pennsylvania, Hotchkiss taught a variety of SU courses in European history, although medieval history was his specialty. His "History of Science" was an especially popular course. My first of six semesters with him was as an undergraduate studying Hellenic history in 1962. By the end of the second lecture, I was deeply immersed in the manners and mores of the ancient Greeks, with blind Homer as my guide through the Trojan War.

The Hotchkiss instruction method was to lead students into a subject by examining origins. We learned, for example, that the lyre, which accompanies the singing of ancient epics, had begun as strings on a tortoise shell. The threshing floor (literally *orchestra*) that was used for fertility rites and harvest festivals was the origin of the classical Greek theater.

Hotchkiss considered the conventional textbook to be a bore and too often "full of holes." We were

*William Park Hotchkiss joined the faculty in 1943 and taught courses on a variety of historical topics, including medieval history and the history of science, his specialties. He retired in 1971 and died three years later at the age of 68. Lillie Kinney, a recently retired librarian who earned SU degrees in 1968 and 1970, took six Hotchkiss courses during her Syracuse career.*



*The late William Park Hotchkiss, professor of history*

usually directed to primary sources for our reading. As he lectured, book titles were tossed out to us from his enormous bibliographic memory. His students pursued many of these titles into the library stacks because Hotchkiss had made them seem so enticing. He knew that the classroom was but the beginning of education, and he incited our curiosity in such a way that we continued our learning beyond the college classroom.

A research paper was an essential part of a Hotchkiss course; I spent a semester with the letters of Cicero and Pliny the Younger that sparked a lasting interest in episto-

lary literature. Hotchkiss expected substantive work in well-written prose, and one's footnotes as well as one's facts had to meet his high standards. Obscenity for him was the jargon then popular among the social scientists (*expertise*, rampant in the 1960s, was especially disdained).

Hotchkiss never profaned his lecture with notes. None were needed. His timing was stopwatch perfect, and his lectures were so well organized that even the most inexperienced freshman could take meaningful notes. And, because of a background in engineering, Hotchkiss was skilled in black-

board illustration. We were introduced to the life of a medieval serf by watching his hut being constructed. Our professor would "build" a cathedral or an early printing press before our eyes. (My notes from those classes are full of feeble copies of his illustrations.)

Above all else, Hotchkiss deplored the disconnected nature of an undergraduate education. His lectures frequently made connections between the many fragments in the student's educational "backpack." Indeed, Hotchkiss was well equipped to provide the links. His own curiosity and scholarship gave him more than a passing knowledge in such areas as art and music, archeology, theology and mythology, literature and language, science, geology, geography, and law.

He firmly believed that the study of history was not a science but an art. "It should be taught in Crouse College," he said. "How can history qualify as a science, when a whimsical incident or accident in a throneroom, boardroom, or bedroom can change the course of history?"

Hotchkiss' musical knowledge and talent were evident in the living room of his home on East Adams Street. The spacious room boasted both a grand piano and an organ, and students, neighbors, and friends were always welcome. The host would render a Brahms concerto or a Fats Waller tune with equal skill (Hotchkiss had earned money for college by playing in a Chicago speakeasy). His home was always a haven for students who had fallen on bad weather, meteorological or financial. To be a Hotchkiss attic rat was a happy solution to adversity.

I have noticed that when two or more alumni discover that they had all been Hotchkiss students, an instant bond of friendship immediately emerges.

William Park Hotchkiss, your students salute you. You opened our minds.

—Lillie Kinney '68/'70