H. L. Mencken looks at the Johns Hopkins quadrumvirate

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The Johns Hopkins Hospital quadrumvirate of founding fathers—William H. Welch, William S. Halsted, William Osler, and Howard A. Kelly—was depicted in 1906 by John Singer Sargent in the familiar painting *The Four Doctors*.

Henry Louis Mencken was arguably the most widely-read journalist and critic in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century.

Mencken was a contemporary of the Four Doctors and, indeed, lived in the same city of Baltimore on the shore of Chesapeake Bay. Mencken was personally acquainted, to a lesser or greater degree, with each of the four eminent doctors. Uncertain is how well-acquainted each of the doctors was with Mencken, although it can be safely said that at one time or another, they all read Mencken's columns in the *Baltimore Sun*. Likely, too, is that one or another of the doctors read Mencken's articles in *The Smart Set* or *The American Mercury*, two widely-circulated magazines of the period edited by Mencken, and in which his opinions and criticisms were often voiced.

Halsted: “gentle and a little inhuman”

It is no surprise that of these four doctors, Mencken had the least to say of dour surgeon William Halsted. There is not much in Halsted’s staid demeanor...
that would set Mencken to tapping the keys of his typewriter. But what little he had to say he said admiringly:

[Halsted] was one of the first surgeons to employ courtesy in surgery, to show any consideration for the insides of a man he was operating on. The old method was to slit a man from the chin down, take out his bowels, and spread them on a towel while you sorted them. Halsted held that if you touched an intestine with your finger you injured it and the patient suffered the effects of the injury. . . . He was gentle and a little inhuman. He had to be because he was so sensitive.\textsuperscript{19425}

Not long after the death of William H. Welch in 1934, an encomium of a sort appeared the \textit{Baltimore Sun}, entitled "A Moral Tale," under the byline of H. L. Mencken:

The late Dr. William H. Welch, one of the stars of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, was a sort of walking reductio ad absurdum of some of the most confident theories of his fellow resurrection-men. For diet he cared precisely nothing, yet he lived to be 84. In exercise he took so little
interest that he never had a golf-stick or even a billiard-cue in his hands, yet he was hale and hearty until his last brief illness. And to top it all, he came into the world with the very sort of physique which, if the insurance statisticians are to be believed, means certain death before 50.

Dr. Welch was hardly more than five feet six inches in height, but he must have weighed close to 200 pounds. With his broad brow, fine eyes, and closely-clipped beard, he was a very distinguished-looking man, yet it would have been difficult to prove legally that he had a neck. His massive head, in fact, sat directly on his sturdy chest, and a foot below it were the beginnings of a majestic paunch. This is the build, according to the professors of such matters, that offers ideal soil for a long list of incurable malaises. . . .

A year or so before his death I happened to sit beside him one day at lunch. The main dish was country ham and greens, and of it he ate a large portion, washing it down with several mugs of beer. There followed lemon meringue pie. He ate an arc of at least 75 degrees of it, and eased it into his system with a cup of coffee. Then he lighted a six-inch panatela [for those of you who have never sinned, a panatela is a slender cigar] and smoked it to the butt. . . . At the lunch itself, I forgot to say, he made a speech, beginning in English and finishing in German.

. . . He lived to be pallbearer to scores of colleagues who made 36 holes of golf a week a religious rite, and to scores more who went on strict diets at 30 and stuck to them heroically until they died at 50 or 60.²

Surprising to me is that Mencken wrote only sparsely of Osler, and that Osler made no recorded mention of Mencken. Surely Osler read Mencken's articles in Baltimore's leading newspaper. Mencken had a coterie of close friends among the
medical faculty at Johns Hopkins, but Osler was not among them. Nevertheless, Mencken did mourn Osler’s departure from Baltimore in a piece published in the October 1909 issue of the *American Magazine*:

A handicap of crushing weight rests upon all the ambitious young medical gentlemen who swarm in clinic-studded Baltimore. It is their evil fate to be measured with a colossus. . . . Say of one of them that he used to sit under Dr. Osler at the Johns Hopkins, and you are giving him high praise. Say of him, going further, that he promises, some day, to be worthy of his master, and you are at the limit of lawful eulogy. . . .

During the last few years of his residence in Baltimore, Dr. Osler might have used Druid Hill Park as a waiting-room. People came from all over the country to consult him, accompanied by their attendant physicians, surgeons, spiritual advisers and nurses; and no Baltimorean of position felt it decent to surrender his appendix without first seeking the advice of the great diagnostician.

In the end the doctors themselves drove him out of Baltimore. By the rules of the healing art, be it known, a physician is forbidden to accept a fee from a fellow-practitioner. Under this rule, the sick doctors of America paid glorious but embarrassing tribute to Osler. They arrived on every train, eager to hear medicine’s last word. They were welcome, and it was a pleasure and privilege to see them—but there were classes to teach, books to read and write, clinics to look after, problems to ponder. The day brought a hundred hours’ work, and but twenty-four hours of time.

Unexpectedly a message came from the King of England, offering Dr. Osler a royal appointment, with leisure unlimited, at Oxford. Baltimore is mourning him yet.3

It was with Howard A. Kelly, the fourth and youngest member of the Johns Hopkins quadrumvirate, that Mencken had the closest personal acquaintance over a period of twenty years, and for whom he had a target for some of the most acerbic arrows in his quiver.

Howard Kelly was born into a family steeped in the fervent fundamentalist tradition of the Methodist Episcopal church. Throughout his long life, his religious fervor never flagged. It is said that whenever Kelly rode in a taxi and the cab halted at a red traffic light he would nudge the driver and say, “I hope when you and I get to the gates of heaven, the light will be green.”4 Then he would proceed to lecture the cabby on the perils of perdition and the promise of paradise.

A twenty-year interplay between Kelly and Mencken began in 1912. Kelly made repeated overtures to Mencken with the intent of saving the soul of the irreverent journalist.

Once, after the two men shared a seat on a train trip from Washington DC to Baltimore, Mencken became so incensed at Kelly’s importunities that he wrote to a friend, “Three separate times I was on the point of jumping out the window of the train.”5

Kelly was a social activist. Not only did he solemnly and daily pray for the redemption of sinners, but he vigorously campaigned for enactment of “Blue Laws” that would prohibit desecration of the Sabbath by commercial activity or frivolous entertainment. In all these contests he faced a formidable foe in Mencken. Yet, if Mencken could not abide the moralizer, he could admire the man. Mencken once wrote of Kelly, “Put a knife in his hand, and he is at once a master of the situation, and if surgery can help the patient, the patient will be helped.”6

While acknowledging Kelly’s surgical acumen, Mencken was confounded by Kelly’s unabashed proselytizing. “How is it possible for a brain to be divided into two insulated halves, one functioning normally, rationally, and even brilliantly, and the other capable of ghastly balderdash?” he asked.7

In his way, Kelly meant well. In a little black book, he kept a prayer list of twenty-one men whose souls he sought to save.8 Topping the chart was H. L. Mencken; also on the list were Welch and Halsted.

**References**


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If you look at the polling now you will find a clear majority of people support the delay, and what's more a large majority of people understand that even after we lift restrictions we'll have to do sensible things in order to stop the spread of infection. The truth of this pandemic is not that we have a Government that wants to act, held back by a weak public. Today the British people are looking at the fence and contemplating our own final leap. People have been left anxious, lacking in self-confidence, sometimes frightened to leave the house. The damage to mental health, especially for the young, will be with us for decades, writes Sir Graham Brady. For months we have been following a ‘road map’ to liberty with a promised end date of June 21. A detractor of democracy, religion, and social norms, these H.L. Mencken quotes illustrate why he's America's most famed cultural critic. No virtuous man “that is, virtuous in the Y.M.C.A. sense” has ever painted a picture worth looking at, or written a symphony worth hearing, or a book worth reading.

When a new source of taxation is found it never means, in practice, that the old source is abandoned. It merely means that the politicians have two ways of milking the taxpayer where they had one before. When National Public Radio (NPR) published a story about a Hopkins team of researchers studying barn owls in an attempt to understand why people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder struggled to focus. It’s not taken into consideration at the grant review level. The IACUC will make sure that any given experimenters are following those guidelines, and if they’re not, that they justify it somehow, but the people who reviewed the grant have no idea what the animals are going through. She further posed that animal studies should undergo evaluations similar to those conducted for human studies. HL Mencken. The older I grow the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom. Contact: [email protected].

With a style that combined biting sarcasm with the "language of the free lunch counter," Henry Louis Mencken shook politics and politicians for nearly half a century. Now, fifty years after Mencken’s death, the Johns Hopkins University Press Privacy | Â© 2020 Thinklab.