

*ROBERT HOUSUM'S HISTORY OF THE NOVEL CLUB  
1896 - 1956*

*In Cleveland on the evening of Tuesday, December 15, 1896, the weather was "inclement". So much so, indeed, we are told, that only a small number of the members of the Ladies' Bryan Association ventured out to attend their regular meeting.*

*There were others, however, who were made of sterner stuff. These plodded through the snow to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Long Cutter, 1174 East Madison Avenue, now East 79th Street; and, gathered there to the number of eighteen, formed themselves into "The Classical Novel Reading Union". It is the sixtieth anniversary of that meeting that we are celebrating tonight, for this pretentious name was soon replaced by the more modest one of "The Novel Club".*

*Peering through the mists of sixty years that divide us from that evening, we can discern two figures chiefly responsible for the formation of the Club: Miss Elizabeth Reeve Cutter and Mr. William L. Torrance. Miss Cutter most of us can recall as the gracious Mrs. Dwight W. Morrow, whose interest in her fledgling persisted throughout her lifetime, and who occasionally, on her visits to Cleveland, enriched our meetings by her presence.*

*Mr. Torrance is a more shadowy, a more controversial figure. A young Englishman whose business pursuits had brought him to Cleveland, he was shocked by what he considered the crudity, the rampant materialism, and the lack*

*of cultural interests of his new home. And on this subject he seems to have been extremely vocal.*

*Presumably Mr. Torrance lacked both tact and a sense of humor; and his unfamiliarity with our manners and customs may have tended to obscure for him signs of a real culture that lay, perhaps, a little below the surface. After all, it was at about this time that John Hay, certainly a cultivated man, used to refer to the Union Club as "The Mermaid", in allusion to the favorite tavern of Will Shakespeare, Kit Marlow, and Ben Johnson, because of the good and stimulating talk to be heard there.*

*But what were the interests of Clevelanders when The Novel Club was founded, as reflected by the daily press? Well, Miss Lillian Russell was appearing at the Opera House in "An American Beauty", while the Star Theatre offered Joe Weber and Lew Fields and their accomplished company of buffoons. The first cotillion of the season, led by Mr. Addison Hough, had just taken place at The Croxden. The Charity Ball was but a few days off. The bicycle craze was at its height, and there were innumerable clubs devoted to this sport. In fact, of clubs of all kinds there was more than an abundance, among which the following names are characteristic: The Sweet Sixteen Club, The Never-Too-Late Euchre Club, The Adroit Pedro Club, and The Merry Ha-Ha's Social Club. Perhaps Mr. Torrance had something after all.*

*The newspapers solemnly chronicled the meetings of literally hundreds of these ephemerids, though they ignored the foundation of The Novel Club. Yet today this organization is approaching a robust middle age with no signs of infirmity. As for the others, like Villon's old-time lords, "the wind has blown them all away".*

*Mr. Torrance sought Miss Cutter's aid in "saving Cleveland from the commercialism in which it was sunk", and she responded gallantly. These two had been reading a pamphlet entitled "The Classical Novel Reading Union" and Professor Moulton's "Five Years of Novel Reading", and they decided that a club, formed to read and discuss the best fiction, should be the intellectual weapon with which they should challenge the mediocrity around them.*

*Miss Cutter, daughter of an old Cleveland family. With a wide and influential circle of friends, immediately set to work, displaying an organizing ability that was later to find much wider scope, and a literary appreciation and skill which she was to transmit to her daughter, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Invitations to join the new project were extended to a considerable number of friends and acquaintances, some of whom were invited personally, others by a letter of which, unfortunately, no copy has survived.*

*Mr. Torrance had been indiscrete enough to observe that he had asked some people to join because they were "interesting personalities", and others in the hope of doing a little intellectual missionary work. Naturally the remark was repeated, and since no one of the prospective members was quite sure to which of these two groups he or she was supposed to belong, some of them arrived at the first meeting in a somewhat belligerent frame of mind.*

*Thus an opposition party appeared in the Club from the very first, with the non-classicists making early headway against the classicists. A signal victory was won the very first year, when it was decided to read Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*. This may be considered the Club's Declaration of Independence: it had firmly refused to become too high-*

*brow. Immediately after this decision, Mr. Torrance resigned. But as he returned to membership some years later, it would be hardly fair to look upon his resignation as a protest.*

*In the Nineties, Cleveland was a comparatively small city that had not yet caught up with Cincinnati. When the Club was founded, the population was about three hundred and fifty thousand. I think perhaps "cozy" is the word that best describes its social atmosphere at that time. People used to say that they knew everyone in town, or if they didn't, they knew who they were; and this overstatement, blatant though it was, yet contained a germ of truth. The Club was first made up of groups of intimate friends - even relatives. Thus, there were the three Sherwin sisters, the four Misses Nash, and various members of the Cobb, Coit, Cleveland and Cutter families. The turnover of members was very rapid at first, until those who were not deeply interested were winnowed out, and after three years less than a quarter of the original founders were still active. Thereafter the membership acquired a certain stability.*

*Not that the Club did not occasionally experience stormy days. A crisis of some sort occurred in 1910-1911, the details of which have now faded from the surviving memories and about which the minutes are superbly discreet and uninformative. But at any rate, more than a third of the members resigned, among them some of the most loyal and devoted.*

*That the Club rallied from this shock so swiftly and with such success appears to have been due largely to the efforts of three young people, all connected with Western Reserve University, who became members at about this time: Jared S. Moore,*

*George F. Strong and Bernadette E. Schmitt, whose fresh enthusiasm revived the flagging spirits of the Club, so that it was soon itself again.*

*It will not be out of place to mention a few early members who contributed a great deal to the Club. Foremost on this list must unquestionably come Miss Jessie Jones, a Founder, a member until her death, and in her later years, the acknowledged mentor of the Club. She was a woman of sound sense, brilliant intellect and warm heart, whose fantastic eccentricities served only to endear her the more to those who knew her.*

*Well remembered too is Charles A. Post, whose later years were devoted to embodying his exact and extensive knowledge of old Cleveland in a series of local histories. An active participant in all the Club's activities, it was he who proposed and made possible the publication in 1899 of "Papers read Before the Novel Club of Cleveland".*

*Another useful early member was R. M. Murray, whose literary knowledge was apparently encyclopedic. If a member forgot or neglected to appear with his critical paper - and this occasionally happened even in the Club's Golden Age - Mr. Murray would leap to his feet and, without the slightest preparation, launch into a polished and lengthy disquisition on the subject, no matter what it might chance to be. There are references from his friends to a quaint personality, deep sentiment and quiet humor, which made themselves felt at the meetings from which he was rarely absent.*

*Then there was Ora Coltman, not only a sensitive artist but a man of an original turn of mind, who for years constituted himself a sort of Loyal Opposition, almost always taking the*

*minority side in the discussions and challenging the accepted opinion.*

*No one who ever met him is likely to forget Benjamin P. Bourland, that stimulating teacher, jovial companion, discriminating gourmet and charming conversationalist. A man of strong enthusiasms and equally strong dislikes, and often violent in his expression of them, he would lay down the law with all the assurance and arrogance of a Dr. Johnson.*

*As the years have passed, there have been few important changes in the Novel Club. The annual picnic, the arrangements for which were always confided to the capable and ingenious hands of Mrs. Jared S. Moore, and which usually reached its climax in an anagram tournament, has passed, with the more Arcadian age that fostered it. It is true that the Constitution, which might have been expected to be a steadying influence, became only a legend and for years was supposed to have vanished from the earth. It is probable that the wish was father to this thought, for as a matter of fact the Constitution is still extant. But from the very first its provisions seem to have been disregarded with pleasing consistency. However, while the letter of the law may frequently have been transgressed, the spirit has remained untarnished.*

*The tastes of the Novel Club throughout its long history may be called conservative. Henry James has been its favorite novelist. It has remained faithful to him during the days of his neglect as well as those of his popularity; and it is gratifying that our steadfast appreciation of him has now the approval of the most discerning critics. Trollope has been a close second, with Dickens and Thackeray, Hardy and Meredith not far behind - surely a most orthodox selection.*

*Balzac quite understandably leads the list of French novelists; among the Russians, Tourgenieff (Turgenev) has been the favorite; among the Germans, Thomas Mann. And we have dealt generously with Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. There is perhaps less cause for satisfaction in the frequency with which we encounter the names of ... but, no, to single them out would be invidious. We all have our lapses.*

*I have been able to find only four novels by Cleveland authors among those that we have read: *The Breadwinners* by John Hay, *By Nature Free* by Hiram Haydn, *Wasteland* by Jo Sinclair, and *The Bounty Lands* by William Ellis. But there have not been a great many to choose from.*

*We have confined our reading almost exclusively to novels, although it is not to be denied that we have occasionally allowed ourselves to fall into that most fruitless of all discussions: What is a novel?*

*There was a brief excursion into drama in 1910, but it was not repeated and was notable only for the fact that, after a reading and discussion of *You Never Can Tell*, it was unanimously voted that Shaw's sanity was open to doubt. And indeed the Club has not been notable for literary pioneering, preferring with few exceptions to confine itself to sound, accepted literary fare, and not to taste of the more exotic dishes until they have been certified as wholesome by common consent, and, after a period of years, admitted to the menu.*

*T. S. Eliot tells us that "old men ought to be explorers"; and perhaps, now that the club has reached its sixtieth year, it will be more adventurous in its choice of reading matter.*

*Its past record has been notable. There is every promise that its future will be even more so.*