WILLIAM BENTON

A Public Life
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Frontispiece: William Benton, 1958

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William Benton was born in 1900 and died in 1973. A midwesterner, his family origins could be traced back to New England along pathways he himself would follow, to Connecticut, Yale, even to his generation's twentieth century version of that special missionary nationalism that gave American internationalism its characteristic shape. He participated in the historic events of his times. It was a participation designed to produce significant change rather than to reflect passively the main currents of an extraordinary period of American history.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable transformation in American attitudes toward the United States as a nation. Insulated from world affairs by the need to settle their expanding territory on the North American continent and preoccupied for most of the nineteenth century by the conditions that culminated in the Civil War and its aftermath, Americans celebrated the turn of the century by invoking a sense of their nation as a world power. A dream that had been, for most of the previous century, little more than a pious hope became a reality but a reality that was not universally appreciated.

Historian Henry Adams was inclined to see it as a prolegomena to tragedy. He and his brother Brooks puzzled over the rejection of their generation of worldly wise New Englanders by midwesterners they perceived as grasping materialists. Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt lamented the rise to power of men like Woodrow Wilson who seemed to them to celebrate the new American nationhood without understanding its implications.

The problem has remained the central issue of twentieth century debate. Propelled out of near colonial status as supplier of raw materials to the industrialized nations of the world, the United States had thrust upon it a leadership in world affairs for which it was totally unprepared.

In many respects, the life of William Benton richly epitomizes those years, but from a perspective as characteristically that of middle western reform enthusiasm as Henry Adams's sense of tragedy was of the disappointment felt by members of the older establishment east. Adams had taken the dynamo and
the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 as symbols of his own ambivalence about the future. Benton saw no threat in the technological changes of the twentieth century, indeed, he reveled in them. Nor did the speed of transformation worry him. The energy unleashed by the innovations of the modern world fueled his sense of an unlimited American future in which Adams’s fearful prophecies had no place.

William Benton’s paternal grandparents were Connecticut clergy, Yale educated missionaries for the Congregational Board, committed to the evangelical zeal that made American missionaries purveyors of that unique mixture of Protestant Christianity and democratic nationalism that was destined to mark American foreign policy well into the twentieth century. His maternal grandparents were equally committed to the agrarian democracy that characterized late nineteenth century politics in Iowa and Minnesota. Charles Benton’s move to the University of Minnesota in 1880 to teach Semitic languages and his marriage to Elma Hixson represented an alliance between two integrally related American reform traditions, eastern evangelical missionary reform and midwestern agrarian democratic reform.

One can trace similar examples of such alliances throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the older eastern elites who had been responsible for the management of American national and international life found themselves being replaced by or forced to make new alliances with the new leadership from middle and western states. Less inclined to see international alliances as the wave of the future and much more insistent on establishing a unique American identity in world politics, the new American leaders sought ways of influencing a larger American public, one whose suspicions of older eastern leaders with their seeming subservience to European models they shared.

William Benton’s career in the advertising industry of the 1920s was as representative of that leadership’s new sense of adventure as was the career of his Yale classmate, Henry Luce. Luce’s experiment with the new *Time* magazine was built on the belief that there was a national market for news
and public affairs that transcended the localism reflected in the nation’s newspapers. Both the newsmen and the advertising man were seeking national audiences for their products. Both saw the selling of quality products as a function of innovations in media technology where radio and movies had begun to signal the emergence of a mass audience.

Benton’s move into advertising and his hiring of another Yale graduate, Chester Bowles, began a relationship that was to continue throughout the lives of both men. Benton and Bowles, the advertising agency they founded together in 1929, was the outgrowth of an experience with the new industry that had grown up after the war, and that had taken Benton from Lord and Thomas, then headed by Albert Lasker, through the Batten agency (later to become part of Batten, Durstine and Osborne), and then to his alliance with Bowles.

Benton’s rapid rise was due in part to his early recognition of the advertising potential of radio, a medium more traditional agencies had not yet had the imagination to integrate with their familiar attention to magazines and newspapers. For radio seemed to require, or at least to suggest, a new identification between the subject matter of the program and the character of the product being sold, an identity that magazines and newspapers could establish only indirectly, to the extent that they did so at all. Sales of products through singing jingles and the personal engagement of the program’s star performers broke down the separation between advertising text and the subjects of stories or articles in print. Advertisers became sponsors. The stars of radio programs became salesmen.

While it is a complex subject to deal with briefly, it is important to point out the consciousness of advertising as a way of influencing public opinion that emerged after World War I. The use of advertising in wartime public programs to conserve fuel and to sell war bonds, like the concern over the role British propaganda had played in the American decision to intervene, had all identified a power in advertising that went well beyond the sale of goods and services. George Creel, wartime head of the Committee on Pub-
lic Information, entitled his post-war account of his agency, *How We Adver-
tised America*. A strong conception of responsibility in advertising, the
belief that advertisers had a role to play in assuring the public that what
they purchased was what wartime censors had described as “wholesome,”
was as important to the sale of products as was the movie censorship board’s
importance to the sale of entertainment.

While critics of the growing advertising industry were inclined to empha-
size what they perceived as the predatory quality of modern advertising, it
is important to see the conception of public responsibility that moved men
of Benton’s ilk to draw no lines between the creative energy they saw in
advertising and their sense of public responsibility. As mediators and mid-
wives in the relation between sponsors of radio programs and the men and
women who acted, sang, or joked their way to public popularity, they saw
every reason to assure themselves that what their products advertised and
the substance of the entertainment provided by the radio programs that
carried the sponsor’s message met their standards of public decency. Like
Benton’s first employer, Albert Lasker, Benton, his colleague Chester
Bowles, his Yale classmates Henry Luce and Robert M. Hutchins, were all
part of a generation that eagerly accepted public responsibility and assumed
that their backgrounds shared enough in common to erase the lines that
critics drew between business interest and public service.

The wartime voluntarism of business carried over into the boom enthusi-
amism of the 1920s, creating an admiring respect for business that was not
designed to survive the stock market crash and the depression of the 1930s
intact. Benton and his contemporaries, nonetheless, sustained it in their
attitudes toward their business activities and their faith in one another.
They were ultimately to form the core of the business and industrial com-
munity that established new relationships between business and govern-
ment in the New Deal and after.

Benton’s decision to retire from advertising in 1935 was part of that sense of
public responsibility. Men of his generation of Americans, like those in the
generation that had preceded him, had adopted a sense of public responsibility characteristic of British upper middle class Victorians. Having made their wealth, often at an early age (Benton, like Herbert Hoover, moved into his thirties as a millionaire) they retired to public service and philanthropy. While the routes they took were often different, or at least followed different priorities, the motive was the same. They believed in some form of stewardship built on older religious or newer social values.

Robert Hutchins’s suggestion that Benton join the University of Chicago administration as a public relations expert and fund raiser had the quality of adventure to it that was characteristic of both men. In the staid world of higher education where fund raising was carried on almost surreptitiously Benton’s ultimate acceptance of Hutchins’s invitation had the effect of adding to the legendary reputation for which the University had been famous from the beginning. The relation between William Rainey Harper and John D. Rockefeller had been the subject of newspaper cartoons in the early years of the University’s development. Harper was a young college president, a superb salesman of the virtues of academic life in Chicago, and a natural publicist. Rockefeller, one of the first wealthy men to recognize the utility of the professional public relations man in the rebuilding of his own reputation, was a man who based his career on his judgment of men who could be trusted to carry on his projects effectively.

The selection of the twenty-nine year old Hutchins as the University’s fifth president was the material, too, from which legends could be made. The handsome young man and his attractive wife had a Fitzgeraldian character which could only have been enhanced by Mrs. Hutchins’s desire to establish her own reputation as a writer and artist. He represented the new generation’s version of the academic entrepreneurship and the very special skill at mediating between faculty and donors that had made the turn of the century creation of major universities possible.

Benton’s agreement to spend several months on a study of the potential use of public relations by the University produced a final document that was in
every respect a path-breaking, if somewhat disturbing, approach to the
“selling” of a university. Fifty copies of The University of Chicago’s Public
Relations were printed in 1936 for distribution to the University’s trustees.
Utilizing data from interviews undertaken by Benton and Bowles investiga-
gators in seven midwestern cities, Benton applied sophisticated, state of the
art advertising techniques to an analysis of the University’s image outside its
own walls.

It was clear to Benton that the University’s image was being influenced by
charges of radicalism levied by critics of the University and publicized by
Chicago newspapers. It was clear, too, that the University’s experiment
with a radio discussion program, the Chicago “Round Table,” which had
been started modestly in 1931, had great potential for spreading the reputa-
tion of the University. Although Benton’s efforts to publicize the Univer-
sity through articles in popular magazines and newspapers were remarkably
successful, his greatest success, perhaps, was in the development of radio
programs that used University faculty and that sought to make university
research intelligible to lay audiences.

Benton’s ten year association with the University was in itself a kind of
adventure. His conviction that university research had to be made available
to the public at large shared a great deal with Hutchins’s view of the role of
the University in public education. The Great Books program that Hutchins
and Mortimer Adler had created to promote popular understanding of
the essential landmarks of human intelligence played a dual role in promot-
ing an interest in ideas among citizens whose careers had not involved
college training, and a publicizing of the values of great university teaching
and research.

If Benton’s conviction that movies and radio had somehow to serve as part
of the University’s responsibility for reaching out to the public at large was
not fully shared by the faculty of the University, it was nonetheless essential
to establishing the image of the University as a central place of research and
teaching in middle America. By 1941 when the University celebrated its
fiftieth birthday, Benton’s work had achieved its purpose.
The years that preceded Pearl Harbor had been troubling years, not only for men like William Benton and Robert Hutchins, but for many Americans who re-examined their experience with World War I and asked quite seriously if it had accomplished what Americans had hoped for when they sent their young to fight on European soil for the first time. Both Hutchins and Benton helped articulate not only for their generation but for many younger Americans the troubling doubts of the utility of American involvement in European affairs that ultimately came to be lumped together as "isolationism." By December of 1941—and certainly by the end of World War II—the term took on a pejorative meaning that suggested a shortsightedness that misstates the richness of understanding that drew many intellectuals on the left as well as on the right into an opposition to American engagement abroad in the years before Pearl Harbor. Isolationism during those years was not the narrow commitment to self-protection it came to signify by 1943 but a profound questioning of the appropriateness of the United States' shouldering of world leadership, a questioning shared by a vast majority of Americans of all persuasions. Our allies from World War I seemed no more willing to accord us that leadership than were our enemies; and the cost in American lives seemed the more disproportionate to the changes American intervention could be said to have brought about.

In 1943 William Benton purchased the Encyclopaedia Britannica from its then owner, Sears, Roebuck and Company. Still determined to find ways of enlarging the audience for scholarly research by bringing an understanding of that research to public attention, Benton sought ways of relating the Britannica to the University, and both to the growing interest in movies and radio as disseminators of new knowledge. Not only was the University faculty to serve as editorial advisors to the editors of the Britannica, but the University was to benefit substantially from the financial success of the Britannica as it established itself as the premiere general reference work, here and abroad.

Benton's varied interests in policy making organizations enabled him to bring together leaders in business, government, and academia. In 1945 he
left the University to become Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, beginning yet another career in the application of his talents as a publicist to the national interest. Under his direction the State Department began the "Voice of America" broadcasts. His efforts to establish new relationships with the press were built on his belief that public policy makers and the press could not benefit from the adversarial relationship that seemed to mark their interaction with one another. His sense of the need to develop intellectual interchanges on a broader scale than had existed before the war led him to support such innovative ventures as the Fulbright Act and UNESCO.

In 1949 he was appointed by Chester Bowles, then governor of Connecticut, to fill a vacant seat in the United States Senate, and ran successfully in 1950 for the remaining two years of the term. A determined critic of Joseph McCarthy when it was considerably less fashionable than it later became, he lost his bid for re-election in 1952. He remained active in political affairs for the rest of his life, working for his friends, Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey, and serving on the Platform Committee for the Democratic National Conventions of 1952, 1956, and 1964.

Benton devoted large portions of his income and the income from Britannica stock to the support of philanthropic activities, especially those concerned with communications and education. His experience at the University had convinced him of the importance of organized research as the essential ingredient in the promotion of a stable future world. His experience in advertising and politics had given him the confidence to commit himself to an educated and enlightened public as the base for modern democracy. Editions of the Britannica bore not only the seal of the University of Chicago but its motto: "Let knowledge grow from more to more and thus be human life enriched."

From one perspective, at least, William Benton's career is a study in the complex relations between the specialized, even arcane interests that are now characteristic of academic research in all areas of human knowledge and the
needs of a democratic society which must be asked to respect that research, sustain it with public and private funds, and appreciate its essential utility. Convinced that there were no insuperable barriers between the highest levels of knowledge and the capacity of the public to understand, he devoted his career to creating new pathways. What is perhaps most remarkable about his career was his willingness, indeed, his insistence, on immersing himself in the worlds with which he dealt. He came to understand a great university by making himself part of it and adjusting his understanding accordingly. One observes in his experience a continuous process of change and development. The public relations man of 1936 becomes the pure research enthusiast of 1945. The isolationist of 1941 becomes the internationalist of 1950. The education of William Benton was a process of understanding things anew and adjusting to them, not grudgingly or fearfully, but with the enthusiasm that could welcome new knowledge to keep faith with the conception of progress and enlightenment that had created an American nation in the first place.

William Benton died on March 18, 1973. Ten years later the William Benton Foundation established the William Benton Fellowships in Broadcast Journalism at the University of Chicago not only to honor his name but to test again and again the hypothesis on which his relation to the University rested. A democratic society could indeed be built on knowledge made available to all, not the preserve of a special class. The responsibility of democratic leadership was to make that transmission possible. The benefits of research are ultimately mass benefits, to enrich the world and to generate the continuing process of research. Each generation must accept the responsibility of making the essential communication work, creating the channels through which human knowledge extends its reach, touches all who need it, recreates the process of research, and assures the enduring promise of the future.
Benton’s paternal grandparents
and their children,

from left: Charles (William Benton’s father),
Harriet, the Reverend William Austin Benton,
Edwin, Loanza Goulding Benton,
Mary, and Henry.
Charles William Bentou
(father of William).
Elma Hixson Benton
(mother of William).
Chart from advertising survey conducted by Benton and Bowles, "Market Research and Copy Investigation on Certo for the General Foods Corporation," 1929.
Analysis of the 1493 women who use Certo

Analysis by type of community:
- 39% Farms
- 38% Villages
- 41% Towns
- 38% Medium Cities
- 37% Large Cities

Analysis by geographical location:
- 47% Eastern
- 48% Southern
- 22% Texas
- 27% Mid-Western
- 61% Coast

Analysis by Classes:
- 27% Poor
- 39% Middle Class
- 53% Wealthy

Analysis by Ages:
- 54% under 35
- 35% 35 to 60
- 22% over 60

General Average: 39%
Benton shortly after leaving
Benton and Bowles, 1936.
University of Chicago
“Round Table” broadcast,
LEFT TO RIGHT: Director
of War Communications Research
Harold D. Lasswell;
U.S. Censorship Director
Byron Price; Benton, 1942.
Advertisement
for "The Human Adventure"
radio program developed
for the University of Chicago
by Benton, Broadcasting, 1944.
WRITTEN BY A GREAT UNIVERSITY
PRODUCED BY A GREAT RADIO STATION

"The Human Adventure"

written by the University of Chicago, originated, produced and presented to the nation by WGN.

Every Thursday night "The Human Adventure" dramatizes a true story of science and research in the great universities of the world.
The purpose of these broadcasts is to acquaint radio listeners with the meaning and service of scholarship in the language of the layman, and help them better to understand the world in which they live.

"The Human Adventure" is a product of the program building power, resourcefulness, and community-mindedness that characterizes WGN, The Voice of the People, Chicago.

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CHICAGO ILLINOIS

50,000 WATTS 720 KILOCYCLES

MUTUAL BROADCASTING SYSTEM

EASTERN SALES OFFICE: 220 E. 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. • PAUL H. RAYMER CO., Los Angeles 14, Cal.; San Francisco, Cal.
Ceremony marking publication
of the first set
of Great Books of the Western World, 1952;
from left: Benton, Robert M. Hutchins,
Mortimer Adler.
Brochure describing "Voice of America"
radio broadcast,
ca. 1960.
the

VOICE OF

AMERICA

U.S. INFORMATION AGENCY
President Kennedy discussing Benton's appointment as ambassador and U.S. representative to the Executive Board of UNESCO, 1965.
Political advertisement
for Benton's first senatorial campaign,
No crystal ball can tell you what lies ahead! Our priceless ballots will help to decide that, next Tuesday. We all want three basic things—Peace! Security! Progress! As your Senator, I have worked toward these goals, and I hope you will vote for me Tuesday, so that I may finish the work I have begun!
Motorcade through Connecticut during Benton’s second senatorial campaign, 1952

Left to right: President Truman, Benton, Congressman Abraham Ribicoff.
Dinner honoring Benton
as first recipient
of the University of Chicago’s
William Benton Medal
for Distinguished Service, 1968
FROM LEFT: Benton,
University of Chicago President George Beadle,
Hubert Humphrey, Paul Douglas.