

# HARVEY EAGLESON

1899 - 1967

## *A tribute by J. Kent Clark*

When Arthur A. Noyes, Robert A. Millikan, and Clinton Judy recruited from Princeton a bright young PhD named Harvey Eagleson, they must have thought they were hiring an English professor. Certainly nothing in his official dossier could have indicated otherwise. His record showed a BA in English from Reed College, an MA in English from Stanford, four years of service as English instructor at the University of Texas, and finally a PhD in English from Princeton, with a dissertation on the medieval metrical romances. But the record was deceptive, and his employers were mistaken. Instead of an English professor they were getting an institution, an attitude, an anomaly, and 38 years worth of legend—a legend which did not end with his death in July.

Perhaps Harvey Eagleson's career at Caltech (1928-66) can best be described as a long series of paradoxes. His presence at Caltech was a paradox in itself. He never had the slightest use for science, which he considered a complicated bore. Furthermore, he regarded a career in science as a commitment to monotony—something like a life sentence in a jute mill. Where most of his humanities colleagues admired science and followed its achievements with interest, Harvey ignored it and hoped it would go away. On the other hand, he was devoted to his scientific colleagues, to the student body, and to the Institute as a whole. As the long list of his beyond-the-call-of-duty activities shows, no faculty member ever spent more time and energy in promoting the interests of the school.

Oddly enough, with his distaste for science, Harvey turned out to be a genius at selecting students for admission to Caltech. In interviewing ap-

plicants, he developed an uncanny knack for picking out the ones who would successfully complete a Caltech career. This knack, which was the envy and despair of his colleagues on the admissions committee, he explained very simply: "I can tell by their shoes." Just how he could judge success at Caltech by looking at shoes he never adequately explained.

Harvey never considered himself a scholar in the ordinary sense of the term. He used to boast to his colleagues that he was the only college professor who was unable to read his doctoral dissertation. The dissertation, he explained, was written principally in Middle English, which he could not remember, and on a subject he no longer cared about. He once summarized his scholarly career with the wry statement: "When I came to Caltech, I used to explain Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot to Clinton Judy. Now the new boys in the division explain Ginsberg and Ionesco to me."

In spite of his disclaimers, however, Harvey did a creditable amount of scholarly work. Besides co-editing three textbooks, he contributed significant articles in novel and poetry criticism, in graphic arts and costume design, and in American cultural studies. More important than his published work was the range of his reading and the wealth of critical comment he passed on to his students and colleagues. An enthusiastic student of the novel, particularly the modern novel, he was probably as well read in this area as any other man of his time. As a critic, he was incisive, perceptive, and individualistic. He was sometimes wrong, but he was never confused. *King Lear*, which many critics regard as Shakespeare's greatest play, Harvey considered the greatest dramatic monstrosity in the language.



*Huckleberry Finn*, often regarded as the great American novel, Harvey characterized as a trivial, silly bore. On the other hand, he had nothing but praise for *The Scarlet Letter*, which his colleagues regarded as a specific against insomnia.

Possibly his most remarkable literary feat occurred during the 1930's. Along with his friend Roger Stanton, he was assigned by Dr. Millikan the task of producing classical comedies for presentation by the student drama club. This involved translating the plays of Plautus and Terence, among others, into actable and speakable dramatic scripts. The task was immeasurably complicated because the final results had to meet the high moral standards of Mrs. Millikan. Eagleson and Stanton not only survived the moral-turpitude test but managed to produce some lively entertainment. Alumni still reminisce about the productions. A few years back one of them sighed: "I haven't been really happy since I was dressed up in a toga and leaping over the candles in Culbertson."

Although Harvey was primarily a literary man and although he accumulated books until they almost crowded him out of his office, his real passion as a collector was for Japanese prints. This taste, stimulated by a visit to Japan in 1932, resulted in an elegant collection which eventually included 101 prints. The collection was noted, even in Japan, for its rich holdings in the work of Hiroshigi. Harvey extended it from its intended 100 to 101 when he was able to acquire Hiroshigi's self-portrait. Ultimately he donated the entire collection to the Los Angeles County Museum.

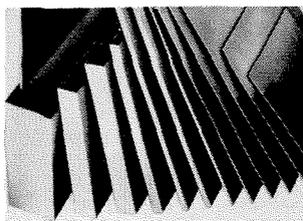
The greatest paradox of Harvey's career was his devotion to and influence upon the students at Cal-

tech. In approach, personality, and training, he was practically the anti-type of the traditional "Techer." Artistic in temperament, conscious of clothes and design, something of a gourmet, very much an Ivy Leaguer in manner, he seemed the man least likely to succeed in the student houses or in a Caltech classroom. Moreover, his unavowed aim of turning Caltech men into sophisticated, culturally oriented, verbally adroit men of the world seemed barely attainable. But contrary to all antecedent probability, the combination of Eagleson and the Tech men clicked immediately. It soon became hard to tell whether he had adopted the students or the students had adopted him. He was rechristened "Doc" and established as friend, counsellor, social arbiter, and wit-in-residence to the Caltech student body. He also became one of the most popular and stimulating instructors ever to meet a Caltech class.

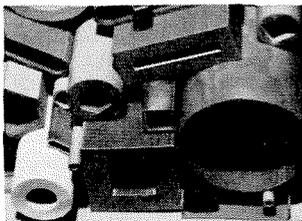
During his long alliance with the students, Harvey spent 12 years (1931-43) as resident associate of Blacker House and two years as Master of Student Houses. Blacker House, incidentally, still carries on the yearly tradition of "Doc's Party"—an entertainment which Doc Eagleson invented. When he left the houses and moved to his apartment in South Pasadena, the social contact between him and students hardly lessened; it merely changed grounds. Besides receiving visitors from the houses, he instituted a seminar that was held in his apartment. This seminar, listed officially in the catalog as English 8, was known to the humanities division as "Eagleson 1" and to the students as "Beer and Cheese." It was looked upon as the grand prize for the literate and the deserving. The success of the undergraduate seminar led, at the urging of his

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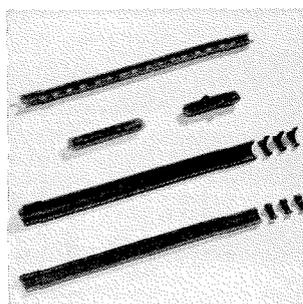
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## Harvey Eagleson . . . continued

alumni friends, to an alumni seminar. This also became famous and was expanded to include wives. It combined his noteworthy skill as a host with his enthusiasm as an instructor.

It should be mentioned that, although Reed College had cured Harvey of the pass-fail grading system and made him a passionate believer in letter grades, he was a notoriously easy grader. A "C" from Doc Eagleson was something like an official reprimand, and a "D" a nudge toward Camarillo. When chided by his colleagues for this soft spot in Caltech's reign of terror, he said: "What can I do? They're so good I have to give them A's and B's."

Part of the secret of Harvey's influence at Caltech lay in his transparent honesty and complete individuality, along with his fine flair for the dramatic. In an age of organization men, he was an original and confirmed nonconformist; in a culture full of fakes, he was a genuine article. Stories about him abound, and he is well remembered even by people who didn't know him personally. Some alumni recall, for instance, one of his lectures at student camp. Reclining on a camp cot, he delivered a disquisition on the evils of Physical Education. Others remember him as a master of ceremonies, or as a story teller, or as the center of a party. Recalling Harvey Eagleson at a party, incidentally, is particularly easy to do, since for years a party at Caltech—student or faculty—was hardly complete without him.

In retrospect, it appears that Harvey had a special talent for friendship. Although he considered himself the prince of all cynics, much more like Scrooge than Mr. Chips, he was in fact remarkably kind and considerate, with a deep interest in the people around him. He enjoyed his friends at least as much as they enjoyed him. They became, in effect, members of his family. Characteristically, his greatest complaint about the ill health that troubled his last few years was that it weakened his rapport with the students, spoiled social engagements, and put him out of touch with his friends.

One is tempted to close a sketch of Harvey Eagleson with the statement that they are not making professors like him any more and that Caltech will never have another one. But no friend of Harvey's could make such a statement without blushing. Although it is undoubtedly true, it would have made Harvey himself groan in protest. A lifelong enemy of Victorian sentimentality and Romantic nostalgia, he would never have held still for such slush. In fact, one can be reasonably sure that he would have despised any memoir of Harvey Eagleson—including this one.