

Character and Action

**A letter from
Kent Clark,
professor of English**

DEAR ED,

On September 8, 1975, Paul Eaton sat down, somewhere in Kennebunkport, Maine, and wrote me a letter. It seems that one of his friends had been reading my old historical novel, and Paul thought I should know that the book was still being read, though it is now out of print. He also thought I should be twitted for not having written another historical novel—for letting my typewriter and literary fame rust. I was joining him, he said, in the limbo of out-of-print authors. In the process of berating me and reminding me of the transience of literary renown, he quoted a drunken Scots marine engineer named Glencannon (the literary creation of Guy Gilpatric). Glencannon had a comment on fame in general: "Sick trampship the glory on Monday." This memorable phrase, Paul thought, applied to both of us.

Well, Ed, I very seldom answer letters right away—or at all. But this one charmed me. The thought of joining Paul anywhere—even in literary limbo—was fun in itself. The addi-

tional reflection that Paul was thinking about me was reassuring and flattering. But beyond all that, there was an odd-ball coincidence of experience. Till I got Paul's letter, I thought I might be the only eccentric left in the world who remembered Glencannon's sloshed comment on the fate of men and freighters. Paul's quote showed me that there were at least two of us. It was like finding out that we had both suffered from a rare youthful disease, like rickets (or Fleming, for that matter). So you see, Ed, I was practically compelled to write a quick response. Within a day or two I had a letter in the mail.

But the letter was not quick enough. By the time it got to Kennebunkport, Glencannon's trampship had already sailed; Paul was dead from a heart attack. In the jumble of sad thoughts that ran through my mind when I got the message was a childish disappointment that Paul never got my note—that he never knew that I knew Glencannon too. (If this sounds addled, it is.) Heaven knows, Ed, my letter was absolutely trivial; in missing it, Paul missed

less than nothing. But the fact he didn't get it left me with the feeling that as usual he is one up on me—that I still owe him something. If you have Puritan ancestors, you're probably familiar with the feeling: There's something you ought to be doing; or, more likely, there's something you're doing that you'd better stop. In this case I thought I ought to be doing something for Paul.

Fortunately, those of us who are saddled with Puritan ancestors get pretty good at ignoring them. At least we don't very often do anything we ought to do. And left to myself, I would have done nothing more strenuous than drink a few ceremonial toasts with our friends. But then I had a long telephone conversation with Katherine Eaton. While we were reminiscing, Katherine asked me to write something about Paul—not a formal memoir but something informal and personal that his friends might enjoy. Katherine's request did it, of course. I can sometimes straight-arm the Puritans, but never the Cavaliers.

What follows, then, will be some of

my reflections on Paul, as we knew him at Caltech. They are not exactly random thoughts, since I have been mulling them over for a couple of months, but they are not researched either, in any conventional sense of the term—unless, of course, you call Winch Jones's stories or Chuck Newton's anecdotes research. (I call them slander.) I did indeed check out such vital facts as whether Paul's vintage convertible was a '39 Mercury or a '41 Ford (it was a '40 Ford) and whether his annual, personal Lent, when he gave up drinking, fell in March or April (it was in January); but I didn't even try to sort out such trivia as why he came to Caltech in the first place or who commanded the ships that he served on in the South Pacific campaign. The Paul that I am concerned with is the one that you and I (and several thousand students) knew personally; and for our purposes it would be more useful to find out where he got his saddle shoes and what possessed him to wear them (God only knows) than when he sailed on the *Ocelot*.

Paul's career at Caltech is, among other things, a refutation of a national cliché. The conventional patter says that during the 50's all college students slept quietly under Eisenhower, untroubled by creative thought or boat-rocking passions. This Sunday-supplement wisdom is probably false in general, and it is certainly wrong where Caltech is concerned. In the 50's and early 60's, Caltech students seemed never to sleep at all, except in class. Instead they spent their time devising ways to get into implausible kinds of trouble. Then, as now, they had a genius for what might be called creative destruction or constructive tort. When I mention the great plane robbery, the penetration of the SAC telephone system, the fake bank holdup, the burning palm trees, and the revival-meeting-cum-assault, you will remember what I mean. You will remember too that these, like the caper with the Washington rooters' cards, were only spectacular variants of a routine depravity—an ingenuity almost guaranteed to make a dean's life excit-

ing, if not impossible. The most modest misdemeanor was apt to bring hot complaints from random citizens, and the more diabolical brought the Pasadena police, and, sometimes, the FBI. The Dean's Office, naturally, was the focal point of all the heat, both official and unofficial. There Paul, as Dean of Students, with his long-suffering colleague Foster Strong, separated the peccadillos from the felonies, soothed the injured or outraged, and sometimes arranged for bail.

Ingenious as it was, the planned misfeasance may have given Paul and Foster fewer headaches than the unintentional errors. Caltech students, it seemed, were just as apt to be ruined by their innocence as by their guilt. For one thing, few of them knew how to drink like gentlemen, and so they drank like trolls. They passed out in strange places, or showed up drunk and disorderly at very bad times. Whether horizontal or vertical, they were often sent back to the campus (and indirectly to Paul's office) along with a summons to appear, or else lodged in some Southland jail. This ritual was scarcely improved by the substitution (or addition) of pot. The new order of the late 60's merely added a legal complication to an established pattern. The stoned simply joined the plastered in the black books of hostesses, taxpayers, and police—and, of course, on Caltech carpets. Both types kept the deans well occupied.

So too did the unlucky or too-lucky lovers. In this area our Techers probably fared worse than they did as drinkers, and for the same general reason—social innocence. Though our raw troops fought gallantly they suffered grievous losses. Inevitably some of the walking wounded ended up in Paul's office. (Usually, I should add, they did not come for counsel or protection but because they were flunking out of school. At Caltech, an attack of love is even more lethal to grade point averages than a passion for bridge.) From time to time, then, Paul found himself treating some very advanced cases of emotional and academic gangrene.

For dealing with delinquents,

whether intentional or inadvertent, Paul probably had the ideal bearing and temperament. Large, ruddy, and imposing, he was ordinarily something like twice the size of the weedy sinners he confronted. Beyond that, there was something in his air, perhaps a faint tang of salt, that suggested a vast fund of worldly wisdom. Without any words at all, Paul's manner could convey the essential message: "Don't snow me, Jack, I'm a fellow member." It also conveyed another vital fact. It said (truly enough) that Paul could *understand* almost anything and that he could forgive a great deal, if the accused was willing to begin by telling the truth. What it did not convey, immediately, except to the most perceptive, was the further fact that Paul cared much more about getting young men out of trouble than about confecting punishments or making examples. Though a veteran sailor (sometimes called "The Admiral" by George MacMinn), he was no relative of Captains Bligh or Queeg. This fact many Techers were to learn by experience.

No doubt much of Paul's essential wisdom in dealing with people was instinctive—or buried so deep in a non-neurotic childhood that it might as well have been hereditary. Perhaps some of it—the part that was unsurprised by any possible depravity—derived from his Congregationalist ancestors, who had a great deal to say about original sin (though without a Caltech background, they could scarcely have suspected how original sin can be). And some of it probably came from books, or at least from the antecedent human interests that led him into history and literature. But he had two experiences that gave him a special advantage in coping with the problems of Caltech. One of these, of course, was his hitch in the wartime Navy; the other was his long association with MIT.

From the Navy he learned the standard military lessons: the evils of red tape, the boredom of long lines, and the soul shrinkage that comes from being reduced to a number. He also learned something about command responsibility and the art of selective blindness—

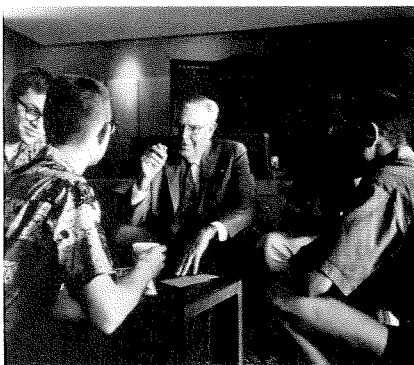
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summarized neatly in the phrase, "Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to." Naturally he became thoroughly familiar with the standard brands of character deviation and the almost ritualized misdemeanors of young men cut off from their familiar environments. Perhaps more important than all this, he learned (or relearned) that 18-year-olds must be treated as adults, even when they are not. This is a lesson, by the way, that naval officers, who sometimes bet their lives on teenage gunners, find easy to remember. In any case, when Paul came to Caltech he did not confuse our students with Eagle Scouts, and he did not feel that he, or Caltech, was to serve *in loco parentis* (like a crazy parent). Long before the students of Berkeley attacked the "sandbox" principle in the streets, Paul was treating Techers as if they were both adult and responsible. Wes Hershey tells me, incidentally, that Paul's errors as a dean were all on the side of salutary neglect and non-intervention. In staying off the backs of the students, he sometimes missed telltale symptoms of ultimate trouble; and, on the other side, he sometimes let a young responsible adult stay overnight in a cold jail.

From MIT Paul learned the peculiar ways of scientific institutions and the even more peculiar ways of the people who inhabit them. Although his Caltech career was to show him a few elegant variations in exotic behavior, he had already encountered the basic types of the scientific egghead at MIT, where several of them were discovered, if not manufactured. At MIT he had also acquired a fundamental understanding of the unrelenting pressures—institutional, parental, and self-generated—that afflict students in science, and he had developed an abiding sympathy with the victims. At Caltech, Paul's sympathetic understanding often sent him to bat for some strange and unpromising characters—sometimes with happy results. He became, in fact, along with Foster, something like defense-attorney-in-residence for the

battered and bruised.

This truth I learned the hard way. For three years it was my misfortune to serve as chairman of the Committee on Academic Standards—in other words as commander of Caltech's firing squad. This job, which transformed me almost overnight from a naive optimist to a naive pessimist, combined all the official joys of a judge and a county coroner. Before our Committee came Caltech's academic delinquents, and it was our task to reinstate the salvageable and to expel the hopeless. The problem



of deciding which was which, I hardly need add, used to give some of us nightmares, and our sessions sometimes resembled autopsies, except that the corpses kept talking. One might have supposed that Paul's long years of dealing with academic failures would have provided him with a thick layer of scar tissue and hardened him beyond mercy. In fact, however, he was at least as reluctant to give up on a student as any of us—and as a group, I like to think, we were the most reluctant band of executioners ever assembled. Furthermore, as chief investigating officer, Paul provided us, at times, with extenuating circumstances and found rays of hope that were practically invisible to less practiced eyes. I used to think he could do a good job in defending Jack the Ripper. (And I *know* he could do a good job in defending Benedict Arnold.) Paul's assurance that a student was a "good citizen" and that the

academic errors were retrievable carried a great deal of weight with us. Sometimes, of course, he (and we) erred on the side of optimism, and we were later forced to expel our errors; but more often than not he was right. When at Commencement he presented the graduating seniors to Lee DuBridge (I hope you can visualize him doing it), they usually included one or two men who owed their Caltech degrees to Paul's understanding and support.

If so far I have made Paul appear as the superintendent of a sanitarium, the impression is essentially correct—and I have not even mentioned our hardcore weirdos. (An essay on this latter subject, incidentally, would be a real contribution to Caltech history. If the libel laws are not too stringent, maybe Jim Adams, Marty Tangora, or Brad Efron, or some other part-time genius, will write one for us—beginning, perhaps, with a sketch of Bernon Mitchell, boy defector to Russia.) But the funny-farm aspects of Paul's job are only a small part of the Caltech-Eaton story. As John Weir pointed out long ago, the Caltech students and faculty, though sometimes capable of behavior that would startle Sigmund Freud, are nevertheless on the average much *nicer* than most people. They may be, John implied, among the nicest people in the world. Among their many virtues, which include a high degree of honor and integrity, is a great toleration for individual differences, not to mention eccentricity. The fact that the students can tolerate their professors, and vice versa, is a good example of this, as is the fact that students and faculty often get along together as if the generation gap had never been invented. At most universities, the aim of right-thinking students is to go through college without ever seeing a dean; at Caltech, students sometimes go to see deans on purpose. In Paul's case, they used to invite him to parties and they were often seen hobnobbing with him in the halls or on the Olive Walk or on the fringes of some athletic field. No one, I hasten to

add, ever mistook Paul for Mr. Chips, or dreamed that he fancied himself one of the boys. But the qualities that made him a joy to his cronies—his wit, his uncommon common sense, his lack of pretense, and his quick perception—were obvious enough to anyone. Now and then, as a representative of Administration (with a capital *A*), Paul may have been regarded as a threat to romance, free enterprise and the good life, but generally he was perceived to be on the side of his troops. And any fool could see that he was a great addition to any licit social occasion.

If all this sounds idyllic, I must point out by contrast that Paul and his brave co-adjutors never succeeded in silencing the complaints about student-house food, and that Paul paid for his friendships and his enthusiasms with thousands of hours in committee sessions. This last subject is almost too monotonous to contemplate. I can see him now, stoical as Marcus Aurelius, trying not to yawn or let his eyeballs film over while one of the campus orators explained the obvious for the fifth time. When we remember how little patience he had with waste motion and what a good ear he had for detecting rhetorical Mickey Mouse, it seems there ought to be a way retroactively to relieve him from about twenty committees. In fact, however, he was practically indispensable—not only because of his official position but because of his good sense and general savvy. Everyone from Albert Ruddock to the janitors trusted him, and everyone seemed to feel safer when he helped make decisions, especially decisions that involved real live people. Perhaps some of us felt that any college dean who could marry an actress—and stay married—possessed a special brand of worldly finesse. At any rate, we all knew that we needed his judgment. If he was not always right (our feeling ran), he was always sane.

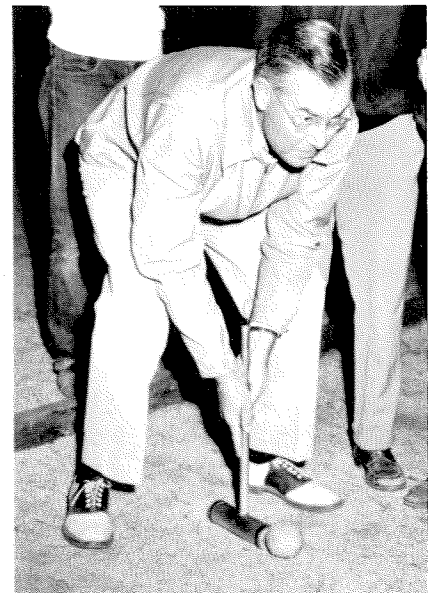
For anything like an adequate report on Paul's adventures as a professor of English, we would need to hear from

his students. On this subject the impressions of his long-time colleagues, like Hallett Smith, Beach Langston and me, don't really count, except perhaps as testimony that Paul himself enjoyed his classes. On the subject of his literary tastes and enthusiasms, however, we could probably talk forever, especially since they help to define him. In literature as in life, Paul preferred substance to style and realism to undisciplined or egocentric imagination. Although he loved a well-turned phrase or a vivid metaphor and could produce an apt quotation at the drop of a pun, what he really cared about was character and action, and the ability of great artists to illuminate these. This taste is hardly surprising, since at Caltech he was forever dealing with characters in action, but it should be considered as a part of a more general view. The notion that art is an autonomous realm that deals only with esthetic values was as foreign to Paul as it was to Aristotle or Matthew Arnold. Paul would have subscribed, I'm sure, to Arnold's dictum that poetry (or literature) is a "criticism of life," although I hasten to add that Paul had more red blood corpuscles than Arnold and Aristotle put together.

Naturally, then, Paul loved great story tellers, great scenes, and great dramatic characters. Naturally, too, he had soaked up Shakespeare like a sponge. (Beach may remember how he baffled us one day by declaiming Rumor's long speech in *Henry IV*, Part II—a passage that neither Beach nor I, who had both taught the play, could even place, much less recite.) But along with the acknowledged masters of plot or characterization, like Chaucer and Dostoevski, he admired a lesser group of authors whose work seemed to have a special relevance to his own experience. These were apt to be sociological or historical novelists like Marquand, Kenneth Roberts, or C. S. Forester, and they were apt to write about New England or the sea, or both. It should not have surprised me, by the way, that Paul remembered Glencannon's

phrase. Guy Gilpatric, the author, was not only a writer of sea yarns but a first-class wit; and Paul loved wit almost as much as he loved the sea. As all Paul's friends can attest, he was a formidable wit himself. His one-liner, for example, about a certain New England school probably deserves to be engraved somewhere in brass: "I didn't have a college education," he quipped one day, "I went to MIT."

Paul's interest in character and action gave him a passion for biography and history to go along with his strictly literary interests. Here he had an advantage that he shared with many bright and sensitive Yankees. He seemed to have absorbed a great deal of history through his pores. Like his Mississippi counterpart William Faulkner, he was almost as familiar with the Civil War generation as with his own—with the difference, of course, that since the Yankees won and the Confederates lost, Paul didn't have to agonize over the subject. Significantly, Paul's absorption with history never threatened to derail him somewhere in the past, say in 1863; it seemed, in fact, to orient him in the present. Although (with a little help from his friend Carl Niemann) he could name General Meade's officers down through the colonels (and maybe



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the majors), he seemed more solidly contemporary than many people whose knowledge of the past begins with the Kennedy Administration.

Where Paul got his knowledge of naval history I don't know. I can only testify that it was both detailed and technical, and that it was not limited in the least to the exploits of the Americans, or to the tales he picked up on stern and rockbound coasts. I remember with bemused admiration how he stunned me once by coming up with the name of the Dutch man-of-war that broke the boom across the Thames during the Anglo-Dutch conflict of the 1660's. For all I know he could have named the Carthaginian naval commanders in the Second Punic War. I'm sorry now I didn't ask him. Along with the military history, of course, went the stories of the fishing boats, the whalers, and the clipper ships—the things all good New Englanders are supposed to know, whether or not they ever read *Moby Dick*.

It is characteristic of Paul's temperament that although, in one sense, he was as New England as clam chowder, he was not in the least a professional New Englander. He moved outside all the stereotypes created by tradition or art. Even his accent was hardly identifiable. He could have stopped by the woods on a snowy evening without remembering that he had promises to keep and without wondering what his horse or the neighbors thought. He was not afflicted with ancestor worship, although he found Yankee characters endlessly interesting.

Perhaps he found courage and character essentially timeless; perhaps as a man of action and a solver of problems he could never take defeatism seriously. At all events, he loved New England, past and present, and particularly the seacoast towns. Every summer, as we all remember, he used to head for Maine, where he could forget committees and concentrate upon wind, weather, books, family and the New England scene.

It is tempting, Ed, to leave Paul at Bar Harbor or Kennebunkport, sipping a bourbon and discussing the deploy-



ment of the stunsail with one of his fellow experts, but that wouldn't be fair to his friends at Caltech. For us it would be better to picture him at one of the many Caltech social gatherings he enlivened, perhaps swapping stories with George Mayhew and Art Small. Or, if we want something absolutely typical, we might choose some random day at the Athenaeum lunch table. Fritz Zwicky (in a mixture of Swiss and "goddams") might be explaining, with many illustrations, what a great genius he was (and he was). Ernest Swift might be telling us, in a Virginia accent, some true stories about early life at Caltech; and Winch Jones, in a California accent, might be telling us some elaborate false ones. Boney, naturally, would be witty in his Americanized French, and Carl Anderson would look incredibly wise, without saying a word in any accent. Meantime Paul, who was a connoisseur of this polyglot nonsense, would be laughing at intervals, amending Winch's most outrageous statements, and adding a few wisecracks of his own.

But although the scene is typical, and

though I suspect that heaven for Paul might include some Caltech dialogue, we can't leave him at the Athenaeum either—even if the food were twice as good as it used to be and his friends twice as witty as they are. Paul's great contribution to Caltech, after all, was not the aid and comfort he gave to his friends in the faculty, but the support he gave to his gallant battalions (often out-gunned, but never out-thought). And for this, one simple scene will do.

Paul, as you may remember, had nothing but contempt for "mature" baseball fans. He thought, in fact, that the phrase was a contradiction in terms; and he looked upon Bill Corcoran, Ray Owen, Bob Oliver, and me (for example) as more or less amiable cases of arrested development. Well, one afternoon ten or twelve years ago, when we still had a baseball stand on the west side of Tournament Park, I strolled over to catch the last few innings of a weekday game between Coach Preisler's squad and Pomona—if I remember rightly. Anyhow, when I walked around the south end of the stand, I saw a sight that stopped me in my tracks. The only person sitting among all the rows of empty seats was Paul Eaton. All alone there, he was something to contemplate; and even then I recognized a symbol when I saw one. Paul, I knew, hardly cared at all whether we won or lost, and he cared even less how we played the game. What he cared about was the fact that the troops were engaged, that they were having fun, and that for a couple or three hours the weight of Caltech was off their shoulders. I can't remember now, Ed, whether I even went up and spoke to him. At worst I didn't clutter up the scene very long. Laughing to myself and mentally saluting, I walked away and left him there, where I think we should leave him now—hearing the traditional yelps of encouragement to the batters and watching the outfielders lose fly balls in the afternoon sun.

Yours,
KENT