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From the SelectedWorks of Sidney F. Huttner

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Lacy’s book is justified on mountains of books, the Everest of them Great, but it only somewhat indirectly concerns them. Lacy writes: “This book – which is part limited historical biography, part intellectual and cultural history, and part history of American education – explains ... inconsistencies, ironies, and paradoxes related to great books, Adler, and his contemporaries. In so doing, a positive assertion becomes apparent: ... those mid-century intellectuals who promoted the great books idea, shared an implicit, cosmopolitan dream of cultural democratization” (p. 6). Still, these people and ideas remain of interest primarily because of the mounds of books piled high behind them. Regrettably, not least for SHARPists, the books get but a microtome of Lacy’s attention.

Readers casually aware of Adler (1902-2001), the 50-plus books he authored from his first in 1927 to his last in 2000, many focused on Aristotle and St. Thomas (though his most durable title is How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education (1940; revised with Charles Van Doren 1972), or the nine plus collections he edited, including two editions of the Great Books of the Western World (1952, 1990) and Propædia: Outline of Knowledge and Guide to The New Encyclopædia Britannica 15th Edition (1974), may wonder why Lacy’s “positive assertion” isn’t, simply, well, apparent from the git-go. The reasons, Lacy argues, are two: over time, the Encyclopedia Britannica corporation surrounded the Great Books set with “cottage industry” apparatus and marketed the combined products with hard-sell salesmanship that compromised initial, disinterested, progressive principles; and Adler, in his 90s, in the 1990s, seemed to, or did, lapse into marginal racism and right-wing political warriorship that undercut his otherwise life-long investment in education and liberal goals. Those whose cultural memories begin in the 1990s may remember this version of the man, and in this Lacy found tension to drive a dissertation (which his book initially was).

Lacy makes extensive use of a few unconvincingly flexible concepts, (e.g., “community of discourse,” “cottage industry”), and there are occasional sentences that left me puzzling whether there was meaning in them or a word or words had gone missing along the way; but the book is far better proofed than one now expects. There is at least one indubitable error: Figure 6.1 (p.132) is a photograph which the caption dates 1974 and which depicts William Benton, Britannica publisher, who is noted, correctly, immediately opposite at top of p. 133, to have died March 1973.

Three chapters (3, 4, and 6) of eight largely concern GBOTWW as editorial and publishing project. While Lacy did not find definitive numbers, Adler believed “about a million” of the 54-volumes sets were sold between 1952 and 1976 (p. 133); a marketing study Britannica commissioned in 1962 found, among other things, that while only 1% of purchasers reported they would tell their friends not to buy a set, only 1% claimed to have read the entire set – though 76% reported they had read “the entire works of one to seven authors, or parts of single authors.” (p. 92). Snippets like these—there are others -- are fascinating, but they float above clouds like Himalayan peaks.

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