

# The Mont Pelerin Society

by Henry Hazlitt

*Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from Henry Hazlitt's unpublished autobiography, My Life and Conclusions, written in 1984, as he turned 90.*

I once had the good fortune to be present at a triangular conversation with Ludwig von Mises and Professor William Rappard of the Institute of High International Studies of Geneva. Dr. Rappard had just been appointed by the United Nations as a member of a commission to promote international intellectual cooperation and was poking light fun at the appointment:

“Now international intellectual cooperation,” he was saying, “consists in this: that one man writes a book, and another man reads it.”

His description was, of course, correct—but not all-inclusive. Face-to-face meetings, in addition, can be very important. And this was something that Rappard himself recognized when he seconded and supported the initiative of Professor F. A. Hayek, then of the London School of Economics, in calling together a group of 36 economists, political scientists, journalists, and three observers, altogether from ten different countries—Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. . . .

It speaks volumes for Hayek's scholarship that this list of 36 participants was picked solely by him, so far as I am aware, and out of his personal knowledge of what each had done and written.

The inclusion of myself may need some special explanation. I was then an editorial writer on the *New York Times*. In 1944 John Chamberlain, who was then book editor of the *Times* and writing a three-times-a-week column, dropped into my office to let me know that he had written an introduction to a book by F. A. Hayek, then in England, called *The Road to Serfdom*, that was appearing a few weeks from then, and that he thought I might be interested in reviewing it. I told Donald Adams, who was then editor of the Sunday book section, of my interest, and he turned the book over to me.

I was deeply impressed by it, and wrote that “Frederick [sic] A. Hayek has written one of the most important books of our generation. It states for our time the issue between liberty and authority. It is an arresting call to all well-intentioned planners and socialists, to all those who are sincere democrats and liberals at heart, to stop, look, and listen.”

When Donald Adams gave me the book for review, he had probably planned on publishing what I wrote somewhere on the back pages. When it arrived, he decided to run it on page one. As a result, as I remember, the book appeared immediately on the list of the ten bestsellers among nonfiction volumes.

A slightly later consequence was that *Reader's Digest* of April 1945 printed a condensation of the book preceded by comments from my review.

But before I say anything about what went

on at Mont Pelerin itself, I must tell of the ocean trip that took some of us there.

I have already pointed out that the largest national contingent present consisted of sixteen Americans. I do not think this was necessarily because Dr. Hayek thought that the largest number of qualified philosophical “liberals” were to be found there. But this may in fact have been so, because the list of “Americans” contained the names of such immigrants as Mises and [Fritz] Machlup. Probably, however, the American contingent was as large as it was because Hayek personally knew of that number.

Passage was booked for some of us on the *Queen Elizabeth*. At the table to which I was assigned there were also Professors Milton Friedman, Frank H. Knight, George J. Stigler, and V. Orval Watts. I’ve forgotten the exact seating arrangement, but I remember that Milton Friedman and I got into a friendly argument every night, and it was always about the same subject—Milton’s strict quantity theory of money, which he seemed to have taken over from Irving Fisher.

I cannot remember why this argument was so persistent, which one of us most often initiated it, or which of us was more disputatious. What I do remember is that neither of us ever convinced the other of anything. We always ended precisely where we began. But the argument never became bitter or personal. The others at the table took very little part in it and seemed to be bored by it.

So far as I can recall now, this is the only major theoretical or policy issue in which I differ from Milton except that I take the subjective view characteristic of Austrian economics, while Milton still seems to find this as alien as it sounds.

The Mont Pelerin meeting lasted from April 1 to 10, 1947. On the opening day Dr. Hayek made a lengthy address telling his reasons for calling the conference. Briefly, they were to bring together a group of economic and political “liberals” (using the word in its traditional sense) from as many countries in the world as could be found and form a permanent society where they could mutually clarify and purify their ideas and ideals and help increase their individual and

collective influence. In his words:

“The immediate purpose of this conference is . . . to provide an opportunity for a comparatively small group of those who in different parts of the world are striving for the same ideals, to get personally acquainted, to profit from each other’s experiences and perhaps also to give encouragement to each other.”

. . . Dr. Hayek’s speech was followed by a talk from Professor Rappard. . . . His talk was mainly devoted to supporting and supplementing Hayek’s own remarks, but he wandered into a discussion of “the economic man” as conceived by Adam Smith, and how far this concept could be stretched. . . .

It was at this meeting, I believe, that Hayek made the proposal that the permanent organization he had in mind should be called The Acton-Tocqueville Society, after Lord Acton of England and Alexis de Tocqueville of France. Immediately Ludwig von Mises stood up and argued against this. I do not believe that he, any more than any of the rest of us, knew that this particular proposal would be made. But out of his amazing range of knowledge he began to list the mistakes that he thought both Lord Acton and Tocqueville had made in their lives and the criticism that might be made of them and therefore of the society. He went on to point out that we were meeting at a place called Mont Pelerin, and that if we called ourselves the Mont Pelerin Society the name would be quite neutral and not open to attack. It had, in addition, a positive value. “Pèlerin” was the French word for “pilgrim.” “Pilgrim” had a good name, especially in United States history.

Mises’s suggestion was adopted, we became “The Mont Pelerin Society.”

I found the meeting immensely stimulating, as I am sure most of the others did also. I formed friendships that lasted through life; and in my subsequent trips abroad, I made a point of visiting these foreign friends. I attended the next two or three annual meetings of the Society as it met in various places in Europe. But nothing equaled the stimulation of the first meeting, in discovering people in many nations who shared the same economic and political ideas and ideals. □