

PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY

The Letters of Hugh Edwards, Selected by Danny Lyon

“What I like—no matter what—is anything that makes me

feel right and glad I am alive.”—Hugh Edwards

Hugh Logan Edwards, who from 1959 until his retirement in 1970 was the curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, was born in Kentucky in 1903. His great-grandfather came from Ireland. His great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee Indian. Hugh's father was an engineer on a river steamboat and Hugh grew up in Paducah, where the Ohio and the Tennessee Rivers meet. His grandfather was shot in the head with a minie ball at the Battle of Shiloh, and Hugh recalled that you could lay your little finger in the crease in his grandfather's skull. Hugh developed a bone infection when he was eight months of age and until the age of six he had to be wheeled around in a cart. He would walk on crutches for the rest of his life. When he completed high school he took a job at the Paducah public library, where he worked for six years. It was in the books at the library that he saw his first pictures, reproductions of photographs in the photographic history of the Civil War. When I asked him if he cared about photography back then in Paducah, he said, “I never thought of it as photography. It was the only form of picture making that I knew.” Photographs were what they represented. “That is the kind of picture I like,” he said. “I want it to represent something, some kind of spring from reality.”

In 1927, after six years of working at the library, he came to Chicago to study music but he was, in his own words, “tone deaf.” On Sundays he had a part-time job at the Art Institute and when the Depression began he was very grateful to have any kind of job at all. He ended up working in the Department of Prints and Drawings and it was there in 1938 that he ordered a copy of Walker Evans's *American Photographs*. The contents astonished him and further justified his belief that photography was *the* way to make pictures. In the 1940s the Art Institute began to show photographs, and Peter Pollock held a regular program of exhibitions there from 1950 until he left in 1957. Photography was then made part of the Department of Prints and Drawings. By then Hugh Edwards had been made an associate curator of prints and drawings, and in 1959 he took charge of the photography program as curator of photography. Between then and 1970, when he retired, he gave a series of eighty-one mostly one-person shows that would change the nature of American photography. After his retirement, he continued to teach a course in the history of photography until 1974. He died in 1986 at the age of eighty-three.

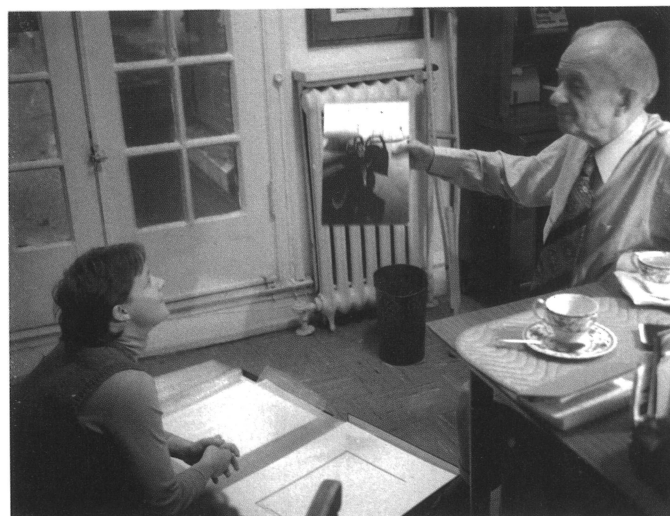
The first time I saw him I was an eighteen-year-old student at the University of Chicago. The university was holding its annual Festival of the Arts and the entries in the photography competition were on display in Ida Noyes Hall. Outside the hall it was pouring, the rain falling across the Midway in sheets. The judge for the show was the associate curator of prints and drawings at the Art Institute, Hugh Edwards. He swept into the hall, escorted by a small entourage of young

men, dapper in his Brooks Brothers suit and vest, and his Konger Cap, quickly propelling himself up the stairs on two wooden crutches. In time he would become both a friend and an intellectual father. I would know him for another twenty-five years and when he died I would give his eulogy, along with David Travis, at a small ceremony at the Art Institute.

Chicago streets must have been laid out for motorcycle riders. I remember kicking over my Triumph, a 650cc machine with a single carburetor that students had put together for me out of parts in coffee cans, the explosion of noise that came out from the straight pipes, and then laying the heavy bike low as I rounded the curves around the big co-op apartments that had been built in the center of 53rd Street in Hyde Park. Roaring onto the street, laying the bike down low to the pavement, rounding the curve, then bringing it up for the straight couple hundred yards past the apartments, then dropping it down again for the second curve, this time on the opposite side. I was twenty years old, four hundred pounds of machine underneath me, noisy and happy, riding north on the Outer Drive, the lake on my right, pulling up to the loading dock of the Chicago Art Institute, where I was allowed to park my Triumph up inside the building.

This was a singular honor. I was going to see Mr. Edwards, and I would walk inside with a small box of eight-by-ten prints. He would look through the prints and hardly say a word, stopping occasionally to say “Hmmm” or “Oh my.” Then finally he would speak, only he would talk about music, or a film he had seen, or a book he was reading. He would talk about everything but the pictures. Three months of work, six months’ work, whenever I had enough new things to show him, I would. In a real way I was living to show the pictures to him, and when he was gone there was no one else to show them to.

No one loved photography as much as he. Few did more for it. He was, despite himself, a curator, a teacher, a critic, and a philosopher. He was also very serious about not leaving any memory of himself. He published almost nothing, saying that he hated to write. He always refused to be interviewed and consequently left hardly a single interview behind. There are very few photographs of him. He said he respected photographers that he never saw carrying a camera. Once during a visit to him with Nancy Lyon, who is my sound recordist, we asked to film him and he refused, saying he didn’t want what he said left “etched in concrete.” When I wrote that down on a pad, he asked me what I had just written down and I said “etched in concrete.” He answered, “That’s absurd. Nothing is etched in concrete.” But he did leave some things behind etched in concrete. During his time as curator of photography he wrote to photographers on his manual typewriter at his desk at the Art Institute. He



TOP: *Hugh Edwards showing a photograph of James Dean to Nancy Lyon, Hyde Park, 1985. Photograph by Danny Lyon.*

BOTTOM: *Hugh Edwards with Danny Lyon, Hyde Park, 1985. Photograph by Nancy Lyon.*

wrote to many of the most significant photographers of the 1960s, and of each letter he made a single yellow carbon copy.

Hugh Edwards never left Chicago. What he knew he learned mostly from music, the theater, and books, which he read in four languages, all self-taught. He said photography “was a contradiction of everything” and that he “loved contradictions.” These are some of the letters that he left.

—Danny Lyon