

Ask the Archivist: Can I Hear It Now?

Some questions for Melissa Mead, the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian.

Two themes in my current research have wonderfully rolled into one. The single theme now questions how the voice of a movement leader imprints upon their listeners but is itself shaped by voices of followers. In my work, I have explored this theme concretely in the words and actions of Fidel Castro, Edward R. Murrow, Muhammad Ali, and Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. During quite varied times of crisis the University of Rochester was a lodestone attracting the oratory of three of these well-known voices of the 20th century: Murrow, Ali, and Jordan. That I might have been present—first as a student and later as junior faculty—for all three of them adds a perspective that researchers rarely have. These voices were preceded by a fourth, Winston Churchill, who in 1941 sought to affect audiences beyond both Britain and the UR campus. What can you tell me about why these non-UR orators were invited, who invited them, where on campus did they speak, and what was their message? Are there sound recordings or photographs still extant of their visit? —Richard Ralston '61 (MA); Assistant Professor of History at Rochester, 1970–74; Professor Emeritus (African, African-American, and Caribbean History), University of Wisconsin–Madison

Eighty years ago this June, the audience in the Eastman Theatre heard the 1941 equivalent of a Zoom Commencement Address. On January 20, 1941, President Alan Valentine invited Churchill to speak at the June Commencement and to receive an honorary degree, noting

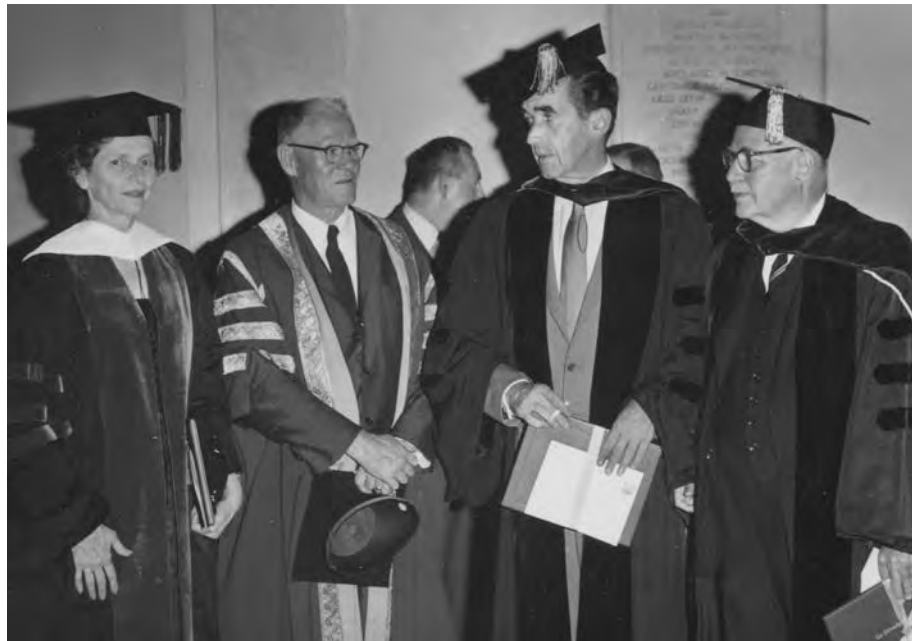
that he hoped the occasion would “attract you . . . because of the standing of this University which, although small, is highly regarded, and because acceptance of the degree would give you an unsolicited opportunity to address the American public from (as it were) a university platform.”

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On June 15, the day before Commencement, the public learned about the special guest. There were many things with the technology that could have gone wrong, and as a precaution, Churchill had prerecorded his speech. In the end, everything went perfectly, and Churchill’s live remarks were transmitted from London via radio hookup from the BBC and NBC. A cover story in the July 1941 *Rochester Review* provides all the details of the event.

Murrow also received an honorary degree, not at Commencement but as part of our first All-University Convocation in 1960, which



HONORIS CAUSA: Edward R. Murrow (third from left) received an honorary degree from President Cornelis de Kiewiet during a 1960 convocation attended by US Ambassador Frances Willis and Williams College’s president, James P. Baxter III.

coincided with Homecoming as a kind of proto-Meliora Weekend. The three-day event was planned in conjunction with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and called “Perspectives in Peace.” According to a press release, “Rochester was among the American universities and colleges invited . . . ‘to explore the theme of the Endowment’s semi-centennial anniversary this year.’” It is not clear who chose the participants for the session in Strong Auditorium, entitled “Communications and the Cause of Peace,” where Murrow appeared along with Frances Willis (US Ambassador to Norway and UN General Assembly delegate) and George Kistiakowsky (President Eisenhower’s special assistant for science and technology).

The undergraduate Outside Speakers Committee invited Ali to speak on May 17, 1971. The main event occurred in a packed Palestra with Ali addressing race relations, his refusal to be drafted, and his recent loss to Joe Frazier. The Palestra was not Ali’s only venue: he apparently first held a brief press conference in the Field House, spoke to a small audience of Black students in Danforth Hall afterward, and then attended a gathering at the Brighton home of Lonnie Mitchell, head of the University’s Center for Afro-American Studies. Not surprisingly, coverage of the events was extensive and included articles in the *Campus Times* and the *Democrat and Chronicle*; the *Times-Union* (Rochester’s afternoon newspaper) was the only paper to report on the Mitchell event, where Ali apparently played the piano.

“Jordan Denounces Separatist Politics” is the headline in the *Campus Times*. Only a press release and two articles in the *CT* provide evidence of Jordan’s Hoyt Hall speech at 4:30 p.m. on Friday, April 12, 1974. She was invited as part of the “Afro-American Lecture Series” sponsored by the College. Her talk focused on civil rights and coalition politics and had no published title.

For more, including audio clips of Churchill and Murrow, visit <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/blog/ata-Spring2021>.