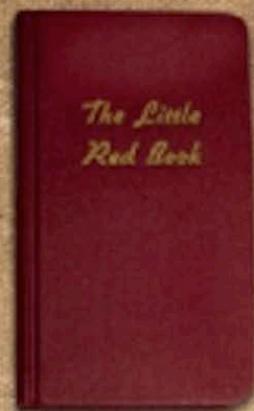




The Story Behind
**The Little
Red Book**

*The Evolution of a
Twelve Step Classic*

Damian McElrath, D.H.E.



The Story Behind
The Little Red Book

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE 12 STEPS OF THE ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS RECOVERY PROGRAM.

The NICOLLET GROUP of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, located in Minneapolis, humbly dedicate to all alcoholic men and women, this interpretation of the A. A. 12-step program.

As uncontrolled drinkers we became "POWERLESS OVER ALKOHOL AND OUR LIVES HAD BECOME UNMANAGEABLE".

This A.A. program by which we effected our recovery is extremely simple; it would need little interpretation in itself, except for the fact it corrects a highly complicated disease which has lowered our physical resistance, distorted our thinking, and rendered us spiritually ill.

Few uncontrolled drinkers realize the danger of their position or the great extent to which the disease alcoholism can damage and deteriorate their minds and bodies. Few realize the full significance and effectiveness of our simple program without the help and cooperation of understanding members who have arrested their alcoholism.

We have no connection with organized religion, medicine or psychology. We have drawn upon certain therapeutic virtues from them all, however, and have moulded them into a Design for Living that has returned us to sobriety and restored us to a place of service and respect in society.

The A.A. program is designed for uncontrolled drinkers who sincerely desire permanent sobriety and are willing to go to any lengths to get it. Men or women interested in temporary sobriety are not ready for this program.

The ability to be honest is
desire of the new member for reh
belief in a POWER GREATER THAN O
necessary to success.

Spiritual concepts must be e

The first page of what would become known as *The Little Red Book*, in its original typescript form, 1945. Mimeograph, courtesy Brown University archives.



The Story Behind The Little Red Book

The Evolution of a Twelve Step Classic

Damian McElrath, D.H.E.

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Center City, Minnesota 55012
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ISBN: 978-1-61649-505-3 (pbk); 978-1-61649-569-9 (ebook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is on file with the Library of Congress

Editor's notes:

Some names, details, and circumstances have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

This publication is not intended as a substitute for the advice of health care professionals.

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18 17 16 15 14 1 2 3 4 5 6

Interior design and typesetting: Terri Kinne
Developmental editor: Sid Farrar
Production editor: Mindy Keskinen



Hazelden's *Legacy 12* publishing initiative enriches people's recovery with dynamic multimedia works that use rare original-source documents to bring Alcoholics Anonymous and Twelve Step history alive.

*To my grandchildren,
Ben, Emily, Nicklaus, Megan, Anna, and Sarah—
who have brought delight and joy
beyond words into my life*

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: The Evolution of <i>The Little Red Book</i>	1
Part I: The Backdrop for <i>The Little Red Book</i>	9
1. Alcoholics Anonymous Comes to Minnesota— Barry Collins and Pat Cronin	11
2. The Alano and Nicollet Clubs	19
3. Ed Webster and the Origins of <i>The Little Red Book</i>	33
Part II: The Conceptual Evolution and Printing History of <i>The Little Red Book</i>	45
4. Stage I: 1946–1949	47
5. Stage II: 1950–1967	57
6. Stage III: Hazelden and <i>The Little Red Book</i> — 1967 and After	73
Part III: Spirituality in <i>The Little Red Book</i>	79
7. Reflections on Spirituality	81
8. The Idea of Personality Change in <i>The Little Red Book</i>	93
9. The Spirituality of Surrender	117
Postscript: God's Will—Man's Will	135
Notes	137
About the Author	149

Acknowledgments

I owe much to Glenn Chesnut, whose research and writings prompted me to explore the earliest expressions of AA spirituality through the writings of Richmond Walker and Ed Webster. His essays on the early printings of *The Little Red Book* pushed me to delve more deeply into that volume, and Webster's other writings as well, and recognize them for what they were: some of the best examples of the early workings of AA and its spirituality.

The first soundings in this exploratory journey were the Hazelden-Pittman Archives at Hazelden, the groundbreaking addiction treatment center in Minnesota. These archives, described briefly in chapter 6 of this book, contained ten printings of *The Little Red Book*, three copies of *Stools and Bottles*, two of *Our Devilish Alcoholic Personalities*, and one copy of the rare book *Bar Room Reveries*. Box 49 contains copies of Ed Webster's letters to and from the cofounders of Alcoholics Anonymous, Dr. Bob and Bill W. Box 77 contains material related to the Nicollet Club, including much correspondence to and from Barry Collins. The contents are in no particular order and must be combed for material related to a particular subject. I am most grateful to Barb Weiner, Hazelden librarian and archivist, for her assistance,

Acknowledgments

especially for the suggestions that led me to sources that I would have overlooked otherwise. I am grateful also for her assistance in guiding me through the paperwork to procure a grant from the AA Heckman Endowed Fellowship Fund, which allowed me to visit the AA Archives in Akron, Ohio.

Gail La Croix, the retired archivist at the Akron AA Archives, was very helpful in alerting me to material in their collections relating to Ed Webster, especially his personal copy of the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* with its many annotations. She also pointed me toward the Dr. Robert H. Smith Archive at Brown University's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies. I am grateful also for the help provided by Jim Burns, the archivist/conservator at the Akron Archives.

Special thanks to David Lewis, MD, Professor Emeritus of Community Health and Medicine at Brown, and especially to Holly Snyder, PhD, for their help in obtaining a copy of the 1945 manuscript *An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous* from the Robert H. Smith Archive. Permission to publish the first page of this manuscript has been granted by the John Hay Library, Brown University.

The very important 1947 second printing of *The Little Red Book*, complete with annotations, fell into my hands quite by accident. Fred Holmquist, director of the Hazelden Renewal Center, discovered a copy at a book sale and purchased it for his own collection. When he heard about my work on *The Little Red Book* he offered it to me for my study

and use. It has played a very significant role in the evolution of this volume. Unless otherwise noted, this second printing of *The Little Red Book* is the one cited throughout these pages.

My thanks to archivist Michelle Mirtz, who provided me with material relating to my work during my visit to New York. Of particular interest was the Bill Wilson correspondence noted in this volume, which revealed Bill W.'s evolving attitude toward *The Little Red Book* and its growing popularity.

A chance e-mail seeking information about Ed Webster led to the e-mail address of his daughter, Lavina Jane Kamiske. She considered the volume about her father long overdue and readily agreed to supply me with photographs and personal recollections.

Thanks also to Ken Ring and Jerry Oys, whose knowledge of the AA Archives in Minnesota helped guide me through AA's early history in that state.

Finally, I am grateful for the grant from the Heckman Endowed Fellowship Fund, which provided me with the opportunity to explore the AA Archives at Akron, Ohio.

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Introduction

The Evolution of *The Little Red Book*

The Little Red Book, written by Ed Webster, was published in 1946 by Webster and his close friend Barry Collins. The first printed edition and its earlier versions went by the title *An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous Program*. It was one of many informal educational tracts with the same title that had been circulating within AA communities throughout the country. Their purpose was to educate the growing numbers of alcoholics seeking knowledge of the program outlined in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, known popularly as the Big Book. Dr. Bob and Bill W., the cofounders of AA, felt that what they had discovered when they first met in 1935 should be passed on. For the first four years this took place by word of mouth, with “one alcoholic talking to another” about the personal experience of recovery. Akron, Ohio, Dr. Bob’s home, and New York, Bill’s home, were the principal centers from which the good news about recovery radiated.

These orally transmitted keys to recovery soon found a safe depository in the Big Book, published in 1939. Two years later, in March 1941, popular journalist Jack Alexander’s

complimentary article in the *Saturday Evening Post* prompted an extraordinary number of inquiries about the program from all over the United States, and AA meetings began to spread across the country.

Soon, some early members began to see the need for an instructional manual that would share and summarize in an abbreviated fashion the principles behind the Twelve Step program presented in the Big Book. One of the first of these was published by AA headquarters (referred to here as the New York Office) in April 1940 with the simple title *A.A.* This tract was composed of six articles that had appeared in the *Houston Press*, written by a newspaperman who had recently found his recovery in the Cleveland AA fellowship. It was intended for people who had little or no knowledge of the Big Book, could not afford one, or were intimidated by the sheer volume of material it contained.

As noted earlier, several versions of *An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps of AA* had already been circulating among AA groups in the early 1940s. One of these, a variant of that developed by the Detroit group, was printed and distributed by a Washington, D.C., group. Pat Cronin, an early AA member in Minnesota, developed his guide, called *Instructor's Outline*, to use in Minneapolis's first AA group, the Alano Club. Soon Cronin chose another attendee, Ed Webster, to help instruct newcomers to this group, who were welcomed into separate "beginners' meetings" for a

time, a practice taken from the first group in Cleveland, Ohio.

It was during this period that Webster began to develop his ideas for his own version of the *Interpretation*—ideas that came to fruition after he moved with some other members to form Minneapolis’s second AA group, the Nicollet Club. Instead of covering all the Steps in just four lessons, as Cronin’s and other versions of the *Interpretation* had, Webster’s version eventually evolved into a small book with an introduction and ten chapters. Each Step had its own chapter, except Steps Six and Seven, which shared one chapter, and Eight and Nine, which shared another. While it shared the *Interpretation* title with other texts already circulating throughout the country, this was a substantively different, greatly expanded work.

Within a few years, the book became very popular throughout the United States and Canada. Webster’s version of the *Interpretation*, which became *The Little Red Book* at the time of the 1949 printing, has a singular place in the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous.¹ Its purpose was to introduce the newcomer to the richness of a new life and improved personality that can be revealed by living the Twelve Steps. In the tradition of the previous interpretations, the language was clear and simple. Its core message, which attracted people from all over the world, was this: Recovery from alcoholism means incorporating into one’s daily life the

spiritual principles contained in the Twelve Steps; that is, restoring one's relationships with our true selves, with others, and with the God of our understanding.

Over the course of the two decades that the book remained in the hands of Ed Webster, he continued to make changes, clarifying his thinking as the twenty-one printings evolved.

Initially, Webster's *Interpretation* earned the support of AA's two founders, Dr. Bob and Bill W. After reading the original manuscript, Dr. Bob endorsed it wholeheartedly, encouraging people to buy it and personally sharing copies with friends. He insisted that copies be kept in the New York warehouse for purchase and distribution. In his early correspondence with Webster, Bill W. also seemed to react positively to the book, but as the years wore on, his enthusiasm for the book waned. Bill W.'s letters clearly express the evolution of his thoughts from approval to concern, not in regard to the book's contents, but because of its widespread acceptance as a standard text that had not been approved by the New York Office. The book's popularity added weight to his support of the formation of the Conference on Approved Literature, which would eventually determine the canon of books approved by the New York Office. One of these books, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, was written by Bill W. and published in 1952 as AA's official interpretation of the Steps. Fortunately, *The Little Red Book* did not die at that