IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT HADEN WILLIAMS

It is difficult for the innumerable friends of Professor Robert H. Williams, who died at Austin on June 10, 1962, to believe that the man himself is gone. So pervasive, so memorable were his spirit and influence that they must long continue to be felt in the University community. He was an embodiment of high principle and moral courage such as one does not forget.

Robert Haden Williams was born at McLeod, Texas, on April 22, 1895. There were three boys and two girls in the family. He worked, as a boy, in his father's pottery and attended the local schools, graduating from high school in May, 1911. He then entered Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas, in 1911, majoring in Latin and Spanish, serving as student instructor in Latin, and receiving the A.B. degree in 1915.

Professor Williams's continuous interest in the welfare of the public schools is explainable partly through parental concern with the education of his daughters, but partly through the fact that he began his career as a principal in the public schools of Kilgore (1915-16) and as superintendent of schools at Malakoff (1916-17), leaving the latter position for fourteen months' service in the Infantry and Field Artillery during World War I. He entered the Army as a private and was discharged as a second lieutenant. On May 31, 1926, he was married to Harriette Millar, who survives him, as do also his daughters Annabelle (Mrs. Fred Catterall III, of Dallas) and Carolyn (Mrs. Michael Stone, of Wichita Falls).

From 1920 to 1925 he attended Columbia University, taking the M.A. in 1922 and completing all requirements for the Ph.D., except publication of his dissertation; the doctorate was awarded him in 1946 after this formality had been complied with, following numerous circumstantial delays. He studied also in the Centro de Estudios Históricos in Madrid, Spain, from July to December, 1924. From 1921 to 1930 he was instructor in Spanish at Columbia and from 1930 to 1941 instructor and assistant professor at Brown University. In 1931-32 he was travelling fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies (for study in Europe); and it was during this time that, ably assisted by his wife, he laid the foundations for bibliographical work in early Spanish literature that continues to serve students in the field. Much of what he collected he could readily have used to augment his own publications; instead, he gave it away to his students. The full import of this project was obscured, and its final publication frustrated, by successive postponements and catastrophes attendant upon the Spanish Civil War and World War II. In a characteristically generous gesture, he bequeathed his library and extensive bibliographical materials to the Spanish seminar in Batte Hall.

Professor Williams joined the faculty of The University of Texas as Professor of Romance Languages in 1941. The record of his services to the University is impressive and important. He was a member of numerous educational committees; courses, teacher training, graduate studies, Ph.D. reading examinations, public lectures, and many more. His colleagues elected him to several terms on the Faculty Council, which he attended faithfully and before which he spoke on many occasions with no little effect. From 1940-45 he was chairman of the Committee on Photographic Reproductions of the Modern Language Association of America, and in 1946-47 a member of the Executive Council of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish. He was one of the associate editors of the Journal Hispania. One of his most productive local assignments was that of departmental representative on the planning committee for the building that became known as Batte Hall. His experience as a teacher and his foresight as a progressive thinker in matters of practical educational detail
(classroom arrangement, adequate sound-equipment, maps, and the like) were largely responsible for making Batta Hall, at the time of its completion, a model building for language study. At the time of his death he was a member of the Lope de Vega Quadracentennial Committee for the Department of Romance Languages.

Professor Williams’s origins, in central Texas at the turn of the century, were of abiding interest and pride to him. He was aware of the cultural limitations of his region in its early days and made no pretense of defending its provincialism, which he saw clearly for what it was; yet he remembered with great accuracy and relish the personalities and local color of half a century ago and was never happier than when relating his friends, over coffee, from a rich store of reminiscence. He was one of the most sociable members of the entire faculty, and his range of interests took him into many fields other than his own, technical as well as humanistic. At an early age he learned the craft of pottery, which was followed for many years by the Williams family at McEade, and a fondness for handcraft remained with him through life. He used tools skillfully and was fascinated by all sorts of manual operations—the making of paper, for example, about which he had read extensively but which he was unsatisfied to experience through reading only: he collected and constructed apparatus for hand-made paper and experimented with paper-making processes so as to give them richer meaning both to himself and to his students in technical bibliography.

He was a realist in his thinking, but there was a deep strain of idealism at the core of his mind. Intensely interested in local and state politics, he was forever convincing himself and telling others that the political situation must surely improve with the next election; yet he seemed never greatly surprised or daunted when it did not. He was sufficiently a citizen of the world to be aware of basic human similarities as well as differences, and he had a broad, philosophic tolerance for both. He could forgive ignorance—could even cherish it, in his keen perception of the ironies in life—but never stupidity, cowardice, or calculated meanness on the part of those he believed ought to know and do better. Inevitably, an unflagging passion for justice led him into collision with some whose devotion to this virtue was more readily adjustable than his. He was nobody’s yes-man: it seems never to have occurred to him to say anything except what he honestly thought, and this was often a repelling quality to others. Keenly sensitive to shades of phrasing and meaning, he shaped his prepared discourses with great care, and was a faculty orator in the best sense of the term. His opponents, it may be, disliked hearing him all the more because of the immaculate clarity with which he expressed himself and because of his gift of vit, which was not lightly to be challenged.

Robert Frost, in “Moving,” speaks of physical labor (suggested by the title) in these lines:

Anything less than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the sown in rows.

Anything less than the truth, as he saw and practiced it, would indeed have seemed too weak to the earnest love which Bob Williams bore to his profession and this University; and anything less than the truth he was unwilling to speak or bear spoken. The possible consequences of such a position he well understood and unhesitatingly accepted; and yet he was sometimes led to wonder, as were his friends with him and for him, how it could be that an institution of higher learning should show so little regard for personal honesty and for candid, independent thought. It is regrettable to record that upon occasion he was subjected to severe personal censure from administrative authority and that for a period of some years before his death he received a salary altogether incommensurate with his rank and service.

No description can do justice to the peculiar charm of Dr. Williams as a conversationalist. It was in casual encounters, as well as upon formal social occasions, that the breadth of his information and ideas became apparent. He was always ready to talk, brilliantly and yet soberly at the same time. His laughter was frequent, hearty, restorative; and there were few conversations or none in which it did not figure.

If, as alleged in Don Quixote, “for a man to attain to an eminent degree in learning costs him time, watching, hunger, nakedness, dizziness in the head, weeping, much struggle and other inconveniences,” this man was willing to pay the price, for he believed, with Cervantes, that “the scope and end of learning . . . is to give a perfection to distributive justice, bestowing upon every one his due, and to procure and cause good laws to be observed; an end really generous, great, and worthy of high commendation.” This, both in
educational and more broadly social terms, was the end sought by Professor Williams, whose whole-hearted dedication to learning was abundantly evident to all who knew and loved him.

Carl A. Swanson
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Publications