Book Reviews


This meaty volume is comprised of seventeen essays written by professors of English, some of whose memories extended far back into the period covered. This material first appeared in the English Department News Letter at the time William Riley Parker was chairman. Parker revealed both a streak of sentimentality, and an even stronger sense of the importance of a history as a practical departmental tool. He felt that these essays would also fulfill the Department of English’s obligations to Indiana University in celebrating its sesquicentennial. Arranged principally in chronological order, the chapters, though prepared by different individuals, give a rather good continuity to the story. In case of the briefer essays there is a chronological overlapping.

The much beloved and highly respected teacher Frank Davidson wrote of those somewhat vague years when English and literature were pulling away from the historic “stump” of rhetoric and the classics at Indiana, and when the university was taking a highly formative step. As in all American universities, 1868-1900, this separation was not without its traumatic moments or bleeding wounds. Under the stirring Jordan regime with its broadening of the university curriculum, introduction of electives, and a higher degree of departmentalization, Indiana University developed an unusually good Department of English. Orrin Benner Clark, George W. Sauderson, Charles H. Gilbert, George Washington Hoss, and others were worthy pioneers. They were able to add many cubits to the teaching of the English language and the literature it had produced. Beyond this some of these men played active roles in liberalizing the entire university curriculum.

In his essay covering the decades 1893-1920 Professor Donald J. Gray deals with a strategic era of expansion in both the Department of English and the university. In these years both struggled to reform themselves into much more significant institutions. Between the departure of David Starr Jordan and the emergence of William Lowe Bryan as a dominant force in the university, the departments under-
took to establish themselves as forces in the general educational process. To this end Martin Wright Sampson, as department head, was able to collect around him a promising young staff. The list of faculty members for these three decades contains the names of many men of bright quality. Among them, Will David Howe, chairman, 1906-1919, Frank Aydelotte, Lewis Nathaniel Chase, Ralph Leslie Rusk, Henry Thew Stephenson, and Frank Davidson, were indeed intellectual adornments.

In a second essay Gray traces the history of the English Department down to 1945 and that great dividing line in American academic history, the end of World War II. Henry Holland Carter was chairman, 1923-1941, and Russell Noyes, 1941-1951. Like their distinguished predecessor, Will D. Howe, both men had an important personal impact on the teaching of English and literature. These were the years when Stith Thompson, Samuel Yellen, Donald Smalley, Chauncey Sanders, Ralph Collins, Will T. Hale, Arthur Lieble, Mary Elizabeth Campbell, Lee Norvelle, and Josephine Piercy joined the staff. These were productive scholars who glorified the name of the university. An important development of these years was the presentation of a sparkling list of literary lecturers to both general and departmental audiences. These also were years of genuine realization of high departmental purposes.

A series of five brief essays by Stith Thompson, John Robert Moore, Laurens J. Mills, Josephine Piercy, Mary Elizabeth Campbell, and Samuel Yellen give intimate personal accounts of service in the department and its efforts to realize scholarly objectives. Professor Yellen's essay is especially revealing in its discussion of the ups and downs of a departmental professor in an era of national depression. The same is true of Professor Russell Noyes' essay on the years 1928-1968. One more essay, Philip B. Daghlian's appraisal of the chairmanship of James A. Work is a genuine contribution in its assessment of how far the field of English in the university had advanced in a century of growth.

This history is rich in names, and the departmental annals compiled by William Riley Parker is the sort of readily available record which every university department should have at hand. This history covers in detail an aspect of Indiana University which the historian of the university
could not possibly deal with in limited space. This well executed history should challenge every other department to follow suit, and first in line should be the Department of History.

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There really is very little point to this review other than as an object lesson in the perils of the Bicentennial. It is not simply that the book under consideration lacks the distinguishing qualities of a scholarly work, but that it is inadequate even as a specimen of popular history. It serves to illustrate nothing more than the grubby opportunism of the marketplace.

Stringing together a series of eyewitness accounts of military actions hardly constitutes a history of the American Revolution, but taken even as a military history it is deficient. The author provides little in the way of a narrative framework. The eyewitness reports are left to stand without critical comment. The War for Independence might just as well be taking place on the moon for all meaning the author imparts to the battles that are described. A lay reader would indeed be hard put to make consecutive sense of the events that constitute the War for Independence.

The claim to pictorial history is equally farfetched. There are all sorts of visual materials scattered through the text, but little rhyme or reason for their presence. Lacking attribution for the most part, it is difficult to say whether the illustrations are in fact of contemporary origin. The impressionistic water colors provided by Smith are pretty but wholly inappropriate to the subject, or to the claim that the work is documentary in character.

In summary, what we have here is a glossy piece of merchandise passing as a history of the American Revolution,