

Lane Cooper

December 14, 1875 — November 27, 1959

Lane Cooper was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey. His father, Jacob Cooper, was Professor of Greek and later of Philosophy at Rutgers College (now Rutgers University), and one of the most impressive academic figures of his day. The son, after graduating with the A.B. from Rutgers in 1896, studied medicine for a year at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, but he found the subject uncongenial and transferred to the Yale Graduate School for the study of English literature under Albert Stanburrough Cook, taking the M.A. degree in 1898. After teaching for a year at the College of St. James, a preparatory school near Hagerstown, Maryland, he went to Germany, where he studied in Berlin under Alois Brandl and in Leipzig under R. P. Wülker, and took the Ph.D. degree in English philology at Leipzig in 1901. During the next academic year, he studied at the College de France in Paris, following in particular the lectures of Gaston Paris. In later life, he felt that he owed most to the teaching of his father and of Cook; from his German experience he especially retained a sense of gratitude to the geographer Friedrich Ratzel, who had been among his teachers in Leipzig.

Returning to the United States in the spring of 1902, he accepted an instructorship in English at Cornell University under James Morgan Hart. Hart encouraged the younger members of his staff to create courses of their own, and Cooper early arranged a course in Wordsworth that led to his studies of this poet and eventually to the making of the *Concordance* to Wordsworth's works (1911) which won the universal acclaim of scholars. Within a few years he built a whole program of courses and made himself into a sort of one-man institute within the Department of English. Assistant Professor in 1906, he became Professor in 1915 and in 1927 was placed in charge of a department of his own which he called "The Comparative Study of Literature," though he gained his title as Professor of the English Language and Literature and continued chiefly to train graduate students for the teaching of English. He was John Wendell Anderson Professor of English from 1941 to 1943, when he became Professor Emeritus. He taught in the summer sessions of the University of Illinois (1914), Stanford (1918), and the University of California (1919).

In 1921 he received the honorary degree of Litt.D. from Rutgers, and in 1943 the honorary degree of L.H.D. from Wesleyan University (Conn.).

Lane Cooper was above all a great teacher, one of the greatest of his generation in America. Unmarried, he made his students the center of his life, lavishing upon them the resources of a strong personality. A man of imposing

presence and sedate carriage, he made an immediate impression by his fine and glancing eyes, beneath a domed forehead and, in later years, silvered auburn hair, and by a resonant voice that penetrated with an edge of tension. Tension, not to say uneasiness, permeated the atmosphere of his classroom, yet did not dominate it; the student felt free to express his own thoughts, discussion was lively, and in a process that often really was mental collaboration, new horizons opened to the mind—sometimes, as happens, new to the teacher himself. There were limitations, the significant structure stood on unquestioned axioms, and woe to the student who seemed unsure of the goodness of God or of Aristotle. He was adept at bringing students of rather indifferent equipment to a high sense of the value of literature and learning and of a disciplined mind. But chiefly he was on the lookout for superior students, whom he urged forward with missionary zeal to undertake higher studies. Already in 1915, he told President Burton of Smith College, who had offered him a professorship, that he had more graduate students at Cornell than Professor Cook had at Yale.

Holding that the effective teacher must also be a continuously productive scholar, he kept up a stream of publications throughout his career. His concordances—of Wordsworth, Boethius, the poems of Milton—are indispensable tools of scholarship. A scholar may profitably consult his *Aristotelian Theory of Comedy*. Yet his greatest strength lay elsewhere than in the realm of pure historical research. Of his twenty-seven books, some of them gatherings from nearly 200 articles and reviews, a significant portion are related to the courses he taught. Even when compilations, these are infused with original ideas. Such is his *Methods and Aims in the Study of Literature*, which Andrew Dickson White read with enthusiasm. Among the first to see that when American students were failing to gain a knowledge of Latin and Greek, they might yet learn something of classical culture through courses in translation, he devised such a course and produced for it his widely used translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and later, translations of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and of a number of the dialogues of Plato. But nothing preoccupied him more than literary form and style, and he himself possessed a style remarkable for purity of idiom and the stamp of personality. A youthful ambition to be a writer was most clearly realized in his essays and addresses on educational, moral, and literary subjects, represented, for example, in *Two Views of Education* and *Evolution and Repentance*. Especially in matters of education, he was known everywhere as the spokesman of an inspired conservatism in a period of novelty and experiment.

For more than half a century he was a familiar figure on the campus, in the town of Ithaca, and in the country around. No committeeman, he exerted much influence informally, for example, in academic appointments. He was an early and devoted member of the Research Club. He took an active part in the affairs of Phi Beta Kappa and

of his fraternity Delta Phi. A track athlete in his college days, he retained an interest in this sport and delighted to extreme old age in acting as inspector at intercollegiate contests. Above all, he was a man of deep though nonsectarian piety; he regularly attended services in Sage Chapel and enjoyed the society of clergymen.

Affable and kindly, but not familiar, he contrived to be at once companionable and solitary. He loved good conversation, humorous anecdotes, and verbal jokes, and he had a pungent wit; yet he was perhaps too ready to take offense and spoil all with a sharp rejoinder. Apart from his close friendship with Professor J. Q. Adams, his relations with the Department of English were not easy while he was in it. Mistrustful of the University administration in his early days, he determined, he said, to make himself independent; and by prudent care over a long life he gathered a very considerable estate, which as the "Lane Cooper Fund" will give scholarship aid to students of the humanities in various institutions. Students were always his chief concern. Generations of them will remember his nightly appearance at the University Library, clearing his throat and exchanging a word with those he knew; afterwards he might be seen with a small group over coffee in Barnes Hall or Willard Straight, whittling matches into toothpicks and leading a more or less scholarly conversation. After his retirement, he devoted much of his attention to his farms in the Town of Lansing, where he soon found friends, and where he spent many hours driving his car around a countryside that in days gone by had echoed to his gun and that of his friend Adams in the hunting season.

There was a magnetism in his personality. He invested everything he did with an aura of importance; he radiated interest and enhanced the value of life. No one would deny that the words spoken of his father Jacob Cooper by the late President Demarest of Rutgers apply equally to the son: "He was no usual person; whoever knew him would never forget him."

James Hutton, Harry Caplan, J. L. Zwingle