

# George Jarvis Thompson

*August 26, 1886 — January 9, 1957*

George Jarvis Thompson for thirty years lived with us in our university and in our community. He came to Cornell with an established standing in the world of legal scholarship. China had known him in his youth, he had taught elsewhere in the United States; but it was at Cornell that Thompson flowered and it is upon his Cornell students that he most impressed himself. On them he lavished a paternal care that was always personal on his side yet always individualized on theirs. He guided the gropers and the fast-paced with equal skill and understanding. He was not only a wheel horse in the Law School. His activities extended into civic, fraternity and church affairs. To his Cornell duties and these other multitudinous aspects of good citizenship he gave himself without stint. Always the busy man, he never found it possible to refuse more work to do. It was typical that when the call came for him he was in harness.

Yet the load of things which he had “got to do” never lessened his cheerfulness. The light that was in him and his good heart were manifest in the most casual of contacts with him. He could show righteous indignation over principles and for causes; but for the fellow mortal he had no meanness of spirit. His insight into men and motives was penetrating; but his attitude was tolerant and it kept his hard words few. Within his world, he lived with students, with colleagues, and with others on a plane of serene good will. For George Thompson the phrase “fragrant memory” is real.

Professor Thompson was born in Asbury Park, New Jersey in 1886. He received the B. S. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1909; the LL.B. from the Harvard Law School in 1912, and the Harvard graduate degree in Jurisprudence—the S.J.D.—in 1918. After practice in various cities and teaching at Pei Yang University in Tientsin, China and at Pittsburgh University, he came to the Cornell Law School in 1926 as Professor of Law. In 1951 he was elected to the E. H. Woodruff Professorship and he was still in full career when he died. Next year he was due to start anew at the University of California Hastings College of Law. He had been approached to teach thereafter at Kyoto University in Japan, thus rounding out his teaching in the Orient where it began.

His wide contacts are shown in his membership in the Bar of the United States Court for China, of the States of Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In 1918-1919 he held the Thayer Fellowship at the Harvard Law School. He was a member of learned and professional societies and a consultant on various legal undertakings both state and federal.

His writings were voluminous. He was a historian of the law. He wrote "The Development of the Anglo-American Judicial System". But he is best known for his work in the field of Contract Law especially as the co-author of the revised edition of the monumental *Williston on Contracts* in eight volumes.

In the Law School curriculum he had taught and remained at home in a long list of subjects both in the private and public field. But in recent years he had confined himself to Contract Law with the first year students and with the maturer men to the impact of law on Business. His temperament and his personality made him particularly effective with beginners, and his wide experience made his other classes no less notable.

In the Law School world outside Cornell he sat on various committees of the nationwide Association of American Law Schools, and was chairman of its committee which produced "Selected Readings in the Law of Contracts." Thompson edited a series of specialist articles into a comprehensive treatise on the general subject. He was a long time Member of the American Law Institute which for years has been restating and defining specific parts of the law, devoting himself primarily to the law of contracts.

In the university world generally Professor Thompson was active in the American Association of University Professors and took part in the investigation of various educational institutions which the Association examined from time to time. From 1946 to 1948 he was President of the Cornell Chapter of the Association, and in 1949 a member of the National Council.

In 1914 on the eve of his departure for China Mr. Thompson married Ruth Warren Barnes and took her into the hazard of new fortunes in an ancient land. The long and happy marriage ended with his death. Their two boys, George, Jr. and Leonard, who both served in the Navy during World War II, also survive and there are five grandchildren.

*G. H. Robinson, R. S. Stevens, O. D. Von Engeln*