

# Frederick George Marcham

*November 2, 1898 — December 16, 1992*

Marcham, born in a “Dickensian” quarter of Reading, England, and, in 1987, the first on whom Cornell bestowed its Award of Honor for exceptional service, broke free from his childhood environment when he won a rare scholarship to Christ’s Hospital, followed his father into the Army in the first World War and was awarded an Exhibition in Modern History at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford University, where he met the historian A.B. Emden, a teacher whom he always mentioned with gratitude and affection. After graduating in 1923, he was encouraged to work for a doctorate at Cornell under Wallace Notestein. His thesis, completed in 1926, was on *Sir Edwin Sandys and the growth of opposition in the House of Commons, 1604-1610*. Not long afterwards he was appointed to the Cornell History Department. He specialized in British constitutional history but was happy to lecture in many fields of history. He wrote three textbooks: *A History of England* (1937), *Sources of English Constitutional History; a selection of documents from A.D. 600 to the present* (1937), and *A Constitutional History of Modern England: 1485 to the present* (1960). His *Sources of English Constitutional History* has made his name universally known in the field of English history. The second edition was published in 1972.

In 1941 he became a Goldwin Smith Professor of History. He was a University Trustee from 1946 to 1950 and served twice as department chairman in the disturbed 1960s. At this time his loyalty to the University was especially conspicuous; he played a significant role in quietly helping to mediate and resolve the 1969 crisis on the campus.

Marcham had an extraordinary devotion to his department. The model he set for it seemed to resemble a combination of the Oxford tutorial system and the academic equivalence of smoke-filled-room politics, but politics based on consensus and without needless controversy. His dedication to the department and university also led him to give great emphasis to the central importance of teaching. Nearly all of his scholarly work was stimulated by his teaching interests and his conviction that history should be taught from documents. He preached the obligation of extended office hours and made known his admiration for an earlier generation of teachers, who, as he recalled, chose to remain on the campus during sabbaticals to talk to colleagues and students.

He declared in 1987 that “my religion is the service of the University; my life is to help other persons to learn” Fittingly, a “Marcham Seminar” in the Society for the Humanities was established in his honour and also the Marcham Scholarship for an outstanding senior history major whose other activities and service to the community reflected Marcham’s life-style. When, at the age of seventy, he retired officially, to his immense pride his department

paid him the unprecedented compliment of inviting him to continue in harness. The result was that nearly one third of his teaching career still lay ahead. After his wife's death in 1977, students helped him fill the void in his life, and he increased the time he spent on his tutorials to thirteen hours a week and, during weekends, often invited students to his house for lunch that he himself cooked. As soon as he had recovered from a stroke in 1987, he returned to his students. He was usefully active to the end and became the most venerable figure on the Cornell campus.

Not surprising, during this remarkably long teaching career he developed his own style of teaching and could put to good effect what he probably loved more passionately than anything else, which was the English language. Every reviewer of his *A History of England* praised the felicitous and balanced manner in which he blended literature and history. The very sound of English words moved him, and this affection increasingly influenced his approach to teaching the past. He was always experimenting with literature as a means of kindling his students' interest. He attached the greatest educational value to studying and, he would insist, enjoying the meaning and force of good writing. It has been said that his ideal assignment was a poem's single stanza, to be minutely dissected for its meanings and historical context.

Marcham's range of activities was capacious and rich. For thirty two years he served as the elected mayor of Cayuga Heights Village and is remembered for his ability to guide group discussion to a fruitful and amicable end but also for refusing to shirk tough decisions. When zoning considerations were involved, he never allowed his loyalty to the University to override his loyalty to the Village. He resigned at the age of ninety, and the Village Office was named Marcham Hall. Uniformed veteran officers of the Cayuga Heights Police Department served as ushers at his Memorial service; they called to mind a guard of honour for an old soldier. He sponsored and taught boxing at Cornell. He was the first chairman of the Ivy League athletic eligibility committee. Yet he remained a reserved person and chose to live modestly. Those who knew him well will remember his courtesy, gentle smile, noiseless gait, a teapot in his hand, and how he paid earnest attention to anyone who spoke to him. As he once said of Carl Becker, he could look through you and still like you. He was a mild man but of inflexible integrity. He could be angry with those whom he regarded as "worthless louts".

He was an avid angler and bird watcher. His *Louis Agassiz Fuertes and the Singular Beauty of Birds: paintings, drawings, letters* (1971) is a magnificently illustrated volume. He also published *Thoughts After Reading Izaak Walton's Compleat Angler*. He cultivated vegetables. But the classroom was where he was most at home. He gave his

last class as recently as October, 1992. As his son put it, “when Dad was no longer strong enough to meet students, he was ready to leave us”.

Marcham is survived by a daughter and two sons in the United States and a sister and four nephews in Reading, England. He had five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

*Paul W. Gates, Walter LaFeber, O.W. Wolters*