

Carl Lotus Becker

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Carl Becker was born on a farm in Iowa in 1873. He spent one year as a student in Cornell College, 1892-93. From then until 1907 when he was admitted to the degree of doctor of philosophy, he was student, graduate student and fellow at the University of Wisconsin, one year fellow in constitutional law at Columbia, three years instructor in History at Pennsylvania State College and Dartmouth, and five years assistant professor of European History at the University of Kansas. For one year, 1907-08, he was associate professor at Kansas, then professor until 1916. After a year as professor of History at Minnesota he came to Cornell as professor of Modern European History, where he became successively John Stambaugh Professor, 1922, John Wendell Anderson Professor, 1940, Professor Emeritus, 1941, and was from then until his death University Historian.

Early in life the future historian discovered his bent—not for history at first, but for the investigation of truth. In a notebook he kept as an undergraduate at Wisconsin, he records his belief that the sole end of education is an informed understanding. The field for its exercise was not long to remain in doubt, for he came immediately under the influence of a gifted master, Frederick Jackson Turner, the historian of the American frontier. In a warm and appreciative but discriminating tribute to Turner published many years later, he records that by Turner he “was infected with a desire to study history.” Here, he found, was a historian devoted to the investigation of truth, one who accumulated facts indeed, but only to discover their meaning. The youthful ambition of the quiet, retiring, studious Iowa farm boy was fed by this example and this teaching, and further fortified by Haskins at Wisconsin and by Robinson and Burgess at Columbia. Later, as a professor, he was himself to inspire successive generations of students with this love of free inquiry, and to send forth in to the academic world many teachers imbued with his own high aims.

He was well on the way to become a seasoned writer when his thesis was published in 1909. Articles and reviews from his pen began to appear in the learned journals within three years after his graduation. In his thesis he is on the threshold of his career as historian and interpreter of eighteenth century Europe and America. Under the title, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1774*, he is dealing with the momentous prelude to the American Revolution in England and America. Notes and bibliography abundantly show the command he had gained of the “sources” for this period. They were to him the raw materials out of which he was to construct his view of man in society. This command and this knowledge he was to extend, to deepen and to widen, until his

period, starting from this center, was to reach backward to the Renaissance and forward to the present moment, and even onward, in some tentative efforts to forecast the future; his method, with the growth in power of his penetrating mind, was to be increasingly informed with philosophical thinking; his style to be polished until it came to be the perfect instrument of his thought.

In his first book, *The Beginnings of the American People*, he sought, in a consideration of the economic movements and the political thought in Europe before the discovery of America and after its colonization, to make clear the intellectual heritage of the American people; in his penetrating and pregnant essay *Kansas*, to inquire into the modifications of that heritage and the development of American democracy by the pioneering spirit and experience. His book *The Eve of the Revolution*, as later his essay *The Spirit of '76*, is a creative effort to find the Revolution in men's minds. He does not disdain to borrow a device from fiction and to assign words and thoughts to historical characters. Based as this effort is on profound and critical knowledge, it succeeds in bringing the revolutionary period to life and enables the reader to realize and feel it in all its aspects. Of the personages of this era he has left memorable portraits, as of Franklin, Hutchinson and Samuel Adams, in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

Professor Becker's ripened philosophical powers have their monument in his subtle, penetrating and illuminating book *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*. Proceeding from this study of the inception of American democracy, he was for the rest of his life to make the democratic ideal the end of his thinking. His efforts to understand in their larger aspects the findings of modern science, his profoundest philosophical thinking, were devoted to assessing its faults and failures and to finding a cure. His contemplation of philosophies of the state that enunciated tyranny, repression and cruelty as the proper means and aims of government, brought him to a reaffirmation of the faith he had declared in his first book:

In the history of the western world, the American Declaration of Independence was an event of outstanding importance: glittering or not its sweeping generalities formulated those basic truths which no criticism can seriously impair, and to which the minds of men must always turn, so long as faith in democracy shall endure.

He gained wide recognition both here and abroad. Always modest and self-deprecating, honors yet sought him out. He was made a doctor of letters by Yale, Rochester, and Columbia. Various universities solicited series of lectures from him. In 1931 he became a member of the editorial board of the *Yale Review*. In addition to the usual learned societies, he was made a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, of the Institute of Arts and Letters, and of the American Philosophical Society. By that society, founded by Thomas Jefferson among

others, he was invited as the conspicuous interpreter of Jefferson's thought to deliver the commemorative lecture on the 200th anniversary of Jefferson's birth.

Near the end of his life he devoted his ripened powers of research and interpretation to the early history of Cornell University. He had found in Cornell his congenial home, he flourished in its atmosphere, he was grateful for the encouragement to freedom of thought that it provided. He undertook this project, therefore, with enthusiasm and found his research rewarded by the discovery of significant facts not before known to Cornellians. His sympathy with the aims of Ezra Cornell and Andrew D. White, his ability to give their contribution its proper setting in the history of American education, his easy, witty, and felicitous presentation of the lives of the founders and of the early difficulties of the founding, make this book unique surely among the histories of American universities.

From beginning to end his was a singularly consistent life—the life of the mind. He put no value on mere learning, but his reading was wide though never paraded. All that he read was literally food for his thought. It was either immediately assimilated, or after discussion with friends and colleagues became part of his thinking, or was discarded. After his thesis, published in 1909, he never indulged in the apparatus of erudition, but the discerning reader was aware of it, aware that it underlay all the easy and felicitous discourse. Fearless searcher after truth, willing to follow where it led, deeply versed in the genesis of ideas, in the triumphs and defeats of human history, well aware of the ever recurring and unregarded traces of old beliefs, old superstitions even, in the confident and self-satisfied thinking of modern men, he dealt with human strivings *sub specie aeternitatis*. He gave small comfort to convinced partisans on either side of public questions. Making human welfare his test of progress, he was constrained to find it often defeated by human ineptitude.

He envied the experimental sciences their much more tractable material. He knew that they have made the modern world, that in the light of their findings forevermore the philosopher and the historian must make their way. No doctrinaire in his criticism of contemporary politics, always ready to sympathize with the difficulties of statesmen in their dealings with conflicts of opinion and with mass stupidity, he could temper his criticism of their blunders with the understanding that progress and reform are achieved only by faltering steps forward and inevitable steps backward. But still he was no counsellor of despair. His wit and irony playing on the human scene seemed to say “this is most deplorable, but we must not be downhearted. We must refuse to blink these futilities and by our very admission of them we may gain strength to correct them.” Kindly by nature and human in his sympathies, but searching in his intelligence, he made us richer by his sojourn among us, and deeply to mourn his untimely end at the height of his powers.