

# Herbert August Wichelns

*December 29, 1894 — March 4, 1973*

With a brilliant record attained at Boys' High School in Brooklyn, New York, Herbert August Wichelns enrolled in 1912 at Cornell University, where he continued a career of high achievement, was awarded the A.B. degree in 1916 and the Ph.D. in 1922. (His dissertation: "Burke's Essay *On the Sublime and Beautiful*: A Critical Edition.") As an undergraduate he was active in the life of the University, joining several of the literary and social clubs, and making his mark as an orator and debater. In 1916 he was appointed assistant instructor in public speaking, and the next year instructor. During World War I he served as a second lieutenant in the Army of the United States.

In 1920-21 he taught as instructor at Dartmouth College, in the following year at New York University, and in 1923-24 as assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Then he returned to Cornell, where he held the rank of assistant professor until 1931, when he was promoted to a full professorship. From 1940 to 1948, with exceptional merit, he performed the duties of chairman of the Department of Speech and Drama; in this capacity he provided strong support to both the Speech and Theatre sections and received the loyal cooperation of his colleagues in both wings. He retired from teaching in 1962.

As a member of the staff, Wichelns served on a number of important academic committees of the College of Arts and Sciences, of the University, and of the Speech Association of America (e.g., as chairman of the Association's Committee on Research), in addition to his functions as faculty adviser to the Cornell Debate Association and to Delta Sigma Rho, and as supervisor of the annual oratorical contests. He was president of the Cornell Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa in 1935 and Phi Kappa Phi in 1937, of the Eastern Public Speaking Conference in 1930, and of the National Association of Teachers of Speech in 1937. He lectured at Yale University, Louisiana State University, and the University of Illinois, and, as visiting professor, taught at the University of Wisconsin in the summer of 1929 and at Columbia University in the summer of 1938.

Of the various studies published by Wichelns, the following should be especially noted: "Burke's Essay *On the Sublime* and its Reviewers" (in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* XXI, 1922); "The Literary Criticism of Oratory" (in *Studies in Rhetoric and Oratory*, honoring J. A. Winans, ed. A. M. Drummond, 1925; reprinted in *The Rhetorical Idiom*, and a section of it, in *Historical Studies of Rhetoric and Rhetoricians*, honoring E. L. Hunt, ed. R. F. Howes, 1961), which has justly been hailed as one of the most fruitful and influential studies produced in our day in the field of Speech; "Analysis and Synthesis in Argumentation" (*The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 11,

1925); “Public Speaking and the Dramatic Arts” (in *On Going to College*, Oxford, 1959); A History of the Speech Association of the Eastern States, 1959; and “Ralph Waldo Emerson” (in *History and Criticism of American Public Address*, vol. II, ed. W. N. Brigrance, 1960). Further, in 1944, Wichelns was chairman of the Committee of Editors of *Studies in Speech and Drama* (honoring A. M. Drummond). And reference should also here be made to his many excellent reviews that appeared over the years, most of them in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

In 1958 a volume of sixteen articles was dedicated to him, *The Rhetorical Idiom* (ed. D. C. Bryant), introduced by E. L. Hunt’s cordial tribute, “Herbert A. Wichelns and the Cornell Tradition of Rhetoric as a Humane Study,” which testifies to the significant part Wichelns played in establishing the Cornell group among the leading departments in the field. The contributions to this Festschrift help to illustrate what Isocrates avers of the importance of speech in society: “The art of discourse. . .of all the faculties abiding in human nature, is the productive source of most of our blessings” (*Antidosis* 253).

In his scholarship Wichelns was a master in the field of modern rhetorical theory and criticism. And, as a teacher, he trained a goodly number of students who became prominent scholars and teachers in the field, among them editors of *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* and presidents of the Speech Association. His students extolled him as a gifted teacher, and prized their association with him. His classes were provocative and stimulating educational experience; he elicited the active participation of his students, and, with his incisive mind, moved promptly to the heart of the subject under discussion, cutting through immaterial and irrelevant considerations, and expressing his conclusions with remarkable clarity and effectiveness. Genuinely interested in the welfare of his students, he was never too busy to see the many who sought his advice and assistance, and in return, he won their deep respect and warm affection. Emphasized among the qualities praised by them and his colleagues and friends were his broad culture, his integrity, his quiet dignity, his kind and generous disposition, his fairmindedness (firm in his convictions, he yet was tolerant of the views of others), his dry and gently ironic sense of humor, and his sage counsel. He was a true *vir humanus* — and an impressive exemplar of the art he taught with such eminent success.

*W. David Curtiss, Walter H. Stainton, Harry Caplan*