

Harry Caplan

January 7, 1896 — November 29, 1980

The death of Harry Caplan brings to a close a career that is surely one of the most remarkable in the history of Cornell University. To record that Harry Caplan was a distinguished scholar and a superb teacher, important though it is, does not begin to describe the depth or the breadth of the impact that he had on his university. To generations of Cornell people—students, faculty, staff, alumni, and their families—Harry Caplan was a friend and counselor. No brief statement can present an adequate picture of his career. It can only recall some of the facts and circumstances, and leave the portrait to be filled in from the reader's own recollections. All who knew him will have their own rich and individual memories.

Harry Caplan was born in Hoag's Corners, Rensselaer County, New York, and attended the public schools of Albany, New York, graduating from high school in 1912; he was valedictorian and won the prize in Greek. He graduated from Cornell in 1916. Among his undergraduate achievements were election to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year, the Barnes Shakespeare Prize, the Frances Sampson Fine Arts Prize, and awards in public speaking. His Master of Arts (1917) and Doctor of Philosophy (1921) were both Cornell degrees. He was graduate scholar in archaeology and comparative literature in 1916-17, fellow in Greek and Latin in 1917-18. His academic work was interrupted by service in the U.S. Army, 1918-19. His doctoral dissertation, written under the direction of Charles E. Bennett, was entitled "The History of the Jews in the Roman Province of Africa." Other Cornell teachers influential on him were H. C. Elmer and Lane Cooper.

His first faculty appointment was in the Cornell Department of Public Speaking, where he was an instructor from 1919 to 1923, a period when Cornell was dominant in the field of rhetoric and public address. In 1924 he moved from Public Speaking to the Department of Classics, in which he served until his retirement in 1967, as instructor, 1924-25, assistant professor, 1925-30, and professor, 1930-67. He was chairman of the department from 1929 to 1946, became Goldwin Smith Professor of the Classical Languages and Literature in 1941, and was appointed Goldwin Smith Professor Emeritus on his retirement in 1967. Though the dedication to Cornell that is implicit in this record was very real and very strong, Professor Caplan enjoyed also an extensive and prestigious connection with other universities, serving as a visiting professor in the summer session at Wisconsin (1925), Michigan (1932), Northwestern (1938), Stanford (1942 and 1948), Chicago (1945), and Columbia (1946). After retirement from Cornell, he held a series of visiting professorships: Mellon Professor at the University of Pittsburgh (1967-

68), Walker-Ames Professor at the University of Washington (1968), Ziskind Professor at Brandeis University (1968-69), and at Minnesota and Stanford in 1969. Much in demand as a speaker, he gave public lectures at more institutions and learned societies than can be listed in this account.

To the world of scholarship, Harry Caplan is known above all as one of this century's leading authorities on ancient and medieval rhetoric, and his publications in this field are marked by breadth of range and meticulous scholarship. His edition and translation, in the Loeb Classical Library, of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* has been recognized as a model of editorial skill and judgment. The elegance of the translation and the combination of succinctness and informativeness in the introduction and notes make this volume a leading contribution to scholarly work on ancient rhetoric. The range and variety of his interests in rhetorical studies are suggested by the volume of his essays entitled *Of Eloquence*, edited by two scholars whose doctoral work he directed, Anne King and Helen North, and published in 1970 by Cornell University Press. Among his other publications are an edition and translation of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *On the Imagination* (New Haven, 1930); a series of booklists of *artes praedicandi*, "treatises on preaching," most of them done in collaboration with H. H. King; several encyclopedia articles, such as "Rhetorica ad Herennium" in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, "Quintilian" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and "Ars Praedicandi" in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*; and numerous articles and reviews in learned journals.

His roster of professional honors and distinctions is long and illustrious. He was president of the American Philological Association in 1955, culminating many years of active participation as a director and officer of the association. In 1957 he was inducted as a fellow of the Mediaeval Academy of America. In 1962-63 he was a fellow of the Center for Advanced Studies, Wesleyan University, and in 1970 was awarded the honorary degree, D.Litt., by Wesleyan. He was an honorary fellow of the Cornell Society for the Humanities. The diversity of his interests is suggested by his membership in other learned societies, including the Modern Language Association, the Speech Association of America, and the Renaissance Society of America. He twice held Guggenheim Fellowships and twice was awarded research grants by the American Council of Learned Societies. A volume of studies in his honor, *The Classical Tradition*, edited by Luitpold Wallach and published in 1966 by Cornell University Press, contains thirty-eight studies by colleagues in Classics and other disciplines. On December 30, 1965, a special session at the convention of the Speech Association of America was held, with addresses in his honor.

To his Cornell students, colleagues, and friends there was a further dimension to Harry Caplan's life that transcends in importance his scholarly eminence, though it can in no way be separated from it. Harry Caplan was a great

teacher, one of the most admired in Cornell history. It was not only the wit and vivacity of his classroom manner, not only, even, the wonderful sense of engagement, of his personal interest in his students, a concern that all who have been his students recall and treasure; there was also a unique talent, springing from his combination of personal warmth and scholarly excellence, that made all his classes experiences in broad humanistic learning. Not that there were many digressions or that much time was taken for anecdotes; for, marvellous raconteur though he was in private conversation, his classes were on their subject, and he was a demanding teacher with a knack for getting the best out of students. It was more that his own broad interests and knowledge always illuminated whatever subject matter he was dealing with. His influence as a teacher extended beyond the classroom, and 121 Goldwin Smith Hall, Harry Caplan's office, was for generations of Cornell students, alumni, and colleagues a place to repair for advice, conversation, consultation, and reunion. It has been well described as "less an office than a way of life." It was, in fact, where Harry Caplan lived; a life-long bachelor of simple and regular habits, he lived in rooms that were only a place to sleep, and his office was the center of his daily life. He served on a multitude of faculty and university committees, and was an honorary member of two Cornell classes, 1924 and 1930. Of the many further honors and celebrations arising from his unique place in the life of Cornell, there is not space for full mention, but two demand notice: the Statler Hall banquet on the occasion of his retirement in 1967, attended by some one hundred and fifty friends from all over the country, the number limited by the available banquet space, and the Cornell Club of New York dinner in his honor on January 22, 1975.

On his retirement his office, 121 Goldwin Smith, was "retired" with him, to become the Classics Department office, and a roomy office was found for him in Rockefeller Hall, where he continued his scholarly and Cornell activities surrounded by his books and by the offices of the Arts College admission staff. There his influence on the Cornell scene continued unabated, as this picture of him as viewed by the admission staff suggests:

Perhaps what struck us most vividly about Harry Caplan during these years was the extraordinary number of friends who came to look for him. Cornellians of every age, from near or very far, stopped in the Admissions Office to look up their former professor, to chat with him about their careers and their families, or simply to be with him for a few moments of warmth and affection. Harry Caplan believed in Cornell traditions and in "legacies;" he took genuine pride in having played a major role in the education of many Cornellians, especially women, and enjoyed seeing again and again "these kids," as he sometimes called them, now with their children and often their grandchildren, sharing in their hope that these "kids" too would choose to continue with their studies at Cornell. Harry Caplan will be remembered for generations to come as the source and inspiration of that Cornell "legacy."

As might be expected in one of such strong human concerns, Harry Caplan was a man of deep family attachments, and kept in close and affectionate contact with his brothers and their families. It was while visiting at the home of his brother, Dr. Louis Caplan, in Seattle, Washington, that he became fatally ill, ending a career remarkable in the annals of his university and of his profession.

We hope that this sketch has succeeded in suggesting what is a very important fact about Harry Caplan's career: that, though many whose lives he touched deeply had only a slight contact with the fields of scholarship in which he was eminent, the two sides of his activity are really one; Caplan the scholar and Caplan the teacher and friend of Cornellians are inseparable parts of a remarkable person. His impact on the fields of learning in which he was engaged and on the generations of Cornellians whom he influenced depended alike on his personal warmth and concern and his devotion to humanistic study. Harry Caplan was an outstanding example of that combination of qualities that he admired in others and that constitute, to use a favorite phrase of his, *a vir humanus*.

Alvin H. Bernstein, Urbain J. DeWinter, Gordon M. Kirkwood