

Otto Matthijs Jolles

March 14, 1911 — July 16, 1968

With the passing of Matthijs Jolles, Cornell lost one of its outstanding humanists who had become one of the leading figures in the councils of the College of Arts and Sciences.

He was born in Berlin, Germany, and studied literature, history and philosophy at the Universities of Hamburg, Leipzig and Heidelberg. He took his Ph.D. at Heidelberg in 1933 and then left Germany because of the disastrous political events of that year. He continued his studies at the Sorbonne for one further year. He then went to the University College of Wales in 1935 where he was instructor in German until 1938, and at the same time took an M.A. in international relations.

He came to this country in 1938 to be instructor in German at the University of Chicago, rising to the rank of professor there in 1955, and acting as visiting professor at the University of Frankfurt am Main in 1960. While at Chicago he was instructor in the Military Institute from 1942 to 1945, a member of the important Committee on the History of Culture from 1947 to 1951 and Chairman of that same Committee from 1955 until he came to Cornell in 1962 as Professor of German literature. He was also one of the editors of the important periodical *Deutsche Beiträge zur geistigen Ueberlieferung*. He played a large part in the expansion of the Cornell Department of German Literature and its curriculum, taught a wide variety of courses, and assumed the chairmanship of the Department in 1965. He was about to relinquish these arduous duties, which he had fulfilled so well, and to go on sabbatical leave at the time of his sudden death.

He was a brilliant teacher and a scholar of international reputation. His special field of interest was the age of Goethe, and he published many articles on Lessing, Goethe and Schiller. He published a full-scale study of Goethe's aesthetics in 1957 (*Goethes Kunstanschauung*, Francke, Berne), and at the time of his death he had almost completed a book on Schiller with the working title *Dichtkunst und Lebenskunst: Studien zum Problem der Sprache bei Friedrich Schiller*. From what Matthijs Jolles had already published on Schiller and from his passionate talking about this subject, it is to be expected that this book will be an important extension of our understanding of this difficult, complex, but great author. And the very title of this work shows that its author "did not," to quote one of his closest Chicago colleagues, "separate the world of letters from the world of life."

His Chicago colleagues characterize the three outstanding features of his work there as "his skill as a teacher, a personal concern for his students, and the breadth of his scholarly interests." His friend and colleague there

Professor Hanns Stefan Schultz has testified that “students came from his classes, whether he talked about Schiller or about Lowes Dickinson, with the feeling that what they had heard or discussed was not some parcel of past history, but something that concerned them and their own world.” This statement was true of his work at Cornell as well, whether inside the German Department or in the Six-Year Ph.D. Program of which he was an early and enthusiastic supporter. His interest in the Program centered, not on the idea of acceleration, but on the idea of interdisciplinary study and of freedom for exceptional students; and he offered one of the first four seminars of the Program on the topic of history and literature, a combination which he had developed in Chicago. He won the warm friendship of the students by his unfailing concern for them and by his whole-hearted dedication to the subject of his interest. He was an adviser and counselor *par excellence*, unfailingly sympathetic, yet he never let his own high standards of performance drop and he demanded the best from his students.

For him, education involved the maximum amount of individual choice. He found a sufficient measure of this at Cornell, though he would have liked more. He was a strong supporter of all interdisciplinary programs, disapproved of departments whose rigid insistence on major requirements discouraged the adventurous student who had thought out his own meaningful combination of interests, and he wholeheartedly espoused the new freshman humanities seminars. His belief in the educative value of the humanities was his outstanding characteristic, and it was apparent in all that he did here. Perhaps his most lasting contribution to Cornell was to encourage us to think not in narrow departmental terms, but to think across the boundaries of individual disciplines. Such thinking was not new at Cornell, nor at the University of Chicago where Matthijs Jolles had enthusiastically participated in a bold experimental educational program. And it was something which he himself had experienced in his student years in Germany, for he had benefited greatly from that freedom to listen to great teachers without being held to examinations, the freedom to be exposed to many different disciplines before committing oneself to a specialization. This was his conception of education.

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