

Max Ludwig Laistner

1890 — December 10, 1959

Max Ludwig Wolfram Laistner, John Stambaugh Professor of History, Emeritus, died in Ithaca, December 10, 1959. He had retired from his active professorship on June 30, 1958. One of the eminent men who made their academic home in Boardman Hall—professors of law, of government, and of history—he had few equals among the scholars who have served Cornell University.

Born in 1890, the son of Max and Lisette Laistner, he had his education at the Merchant Taylor's school in London and at Cambridge University. At Cambridge he gained distinction, winning first class honors in classics and the Craven scholarship for archeological studies. His studies took him to Greece and widened his knowledge of the European scene and of European languages. German he knew as familiarly as he knew English; he spoke and read French and Italian. He now gained a working knowledge of modern Greek. The Greek and Latin of the ancients he had mastered so well during his formal education that on returning to England he won appointment as assistant lecturer in classics at Birmingham University. Following a brief period of service in the British Army, where he held the rank of sergeant, he took up academic life again and lectured on ancient history at Manchester University and at the University of London.

He came to Cornell University as Professor of Ancient History in 1925 and soon made his mark among the historians and classical scholars of this country. Cornell bestowed upon him the title of John Stambaugh Professor of History in 1940. As such he was successor to the late Professor Carl Becker. In later years he served for brief periods as special lecturer at the University of California and the University of Virginia.

Professor Laistner's fame rests upon his achievement as a scholar and as a teacher of graduate students. The most widely known of his books is *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, A.D. 300-900*, but his scholarship ranged over many topics in the ancient and medieval history of the West and included work of great importance regarding the writings of the Venerable Bede. The high standard and considerable volume of his scholarship gained for him the degree of Doctor of Letters, which Cambridge awarded him in 1944. His old college, Jesus College, Cambridge, elected him an honorary fellow, a mark of distinction he treasured with special pride. Scholarly societies in the United States and in Europe accorded him membership and used his services in positions of authority. Among students of the humanities he was known throughout the world.

Professor Laistner had a mind of unusual power. Exactness of knowledge was its first quality, capaciousness the second. What he knew he knew precisely. He knew much. The literature and thought of early Western civilization were open to him, and in these wide, rich fields he journeyed throughout his life. He read constantly in modern European history and had a knowledge of certain aspects of British history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries surpassed by few in this country. During the second World War he joined the motley crew of professors who taught American history to the Army and Navy students who came to Cornell.

The sciences were outside the range of his knowledge. Music he knew well and enjoyed deeply, as became a member of a distinguished musical family. He served for many years on the University's Music Committee.

Professor Laistner's taste in music and other arts was conservative. He was conservative too in his attitude toward the social and political life of our times. He had too large a mind to be a die-hard Tory. Perhaps, as one who remained a British subject throughout his life, he would have claimed Victorian liberalism as his creed, the liberalism and urbanity of a Morley shading into the liberal conservatism of a Macmillan, with a touch of Churchill too. But while he adjusted his political views to the twentieth century he rejected many creations of our times. Not for him the automobile, the gramophone, or the radio. Even the telephone stirred him to loud abuse unless it served his purpose and then was hung up. Taxi and bus he took in time of necessity. More commonly he walked, and with a firm step as though to demonstrate his self-reliance.

Self-reliant he was on one side. On the other he depended much upon the few people who made up his intimate circle. Of these by far the most important while she lived was his mother. She had joined him in Ithaca the year after he came here, and she, strong as of the earth, wise, witty, warm-hearted, remained the center of his household for thirty years. No mother had a more devoted son.

He was constant as a friend to the dozen or so men and women who were members of his circle. To them, as to his graduate students, he was a sound, steady, frank adviser, a man to turn to in time of need, for there was within him a rock-like integrity. The quality of mind that made his scholarship purposeful and exact shone out in his judgments on matters of principle, however slight or personal the topic. He made clear choices and did not waver. Nor did he hesitate to avow his prejudices. But though the quality of his mind was rock-like, he was a man of warm heart and deep emotion. These also he did not hide. He was quick to assuage the grief of others, to concern himself over their health, to rejoice in their happiness.

Ill health had gained upon him in the last few years. Death took away a great scholar, a humanist of many gifts, whose mind had been trained in a discipline rare in the world of today. As members of the Cornell community we mourn the passing of one who shared his learning with us and enlarged the reputation of this University. Those who were in the fellowship of his acquaintance know that they have lost a loyal friend, a man upright, spirited, wise, and generous.

F. G. Marcham, Knight Biggerstaff, Harry Caplan