

# Julian Pleasant Bretz

*December 29, 1876 — June 15, 1951*

After a long illness Julian Pleasant Bretz died on June 15, 1951. Born in St. Joseph, Missouri, he was graduated in 1899 from William Jewell College. For some six years he was in the employ of the Burlington Railroad, an experience of which he always spoke with pride and to which, at least in part, one may perhaps attribute an early interest, maintained throughout his life, in the history of transportation, as well as in the relations between Employer and Labor. During the greater part of that period he was also a graduate student in the University of Chicago. There, after obtaining his doctorate in 1906, he was for two years a junior teacher of history. He joined the Cornell Faculty as an assistant professor in 1908 and became professor of American History in 1910, a position which he filled with conspicuous success until his retirement in 1944, when the title of professor emeritus was conferred on him by the Board of Trustees.

Bretz's remarkable success as a teacher was due to several factors: mastery of his subject, an unusual ability to illuminate contemporary political and social questions by relating them, by way of comparison or contrast, to the earlier history and development of the United States, and an enviable gift of clear and lively exposition. The lasting regard and admiration felt for him by his students was shown year after year, when they flocked around him at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association or when, on their occasional return to Ithaca, they invariably sought him out. The published contributions to his subject were few, but of high quality; and for more than thirty years he was a frequent and valued reviewer in the *American Historical Review* and the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*.

Bretz also devoted much time and thought to problems of university administration. After the Administrative Board in charge of Freshmen and Sophomores had been superseded in 1915-16 by the Committee of Advice to Underclassmen, he was for a number of years its energetic and highly efficient chairman. Later, he was at different times a member of the Educational Policy Committee, Secretary of the University Faculty, member of the University Policy Committee, and Faculty representative on the Board of Trustees. His wide administrative experience and judicial temper received further recognition, when he became a member, and indeed secretary, of the Trustee-Faculty Committee appointed to choose a successor to President Farrand. For many years he was one of the most impressive and respected speakers in the University Faculty and the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences. His contributions to debate were memorable no less for their breadth of view and fairness to the opinions

of his opponents than for their admirable and logical presentation; and he was ever a champion of liberal ideas and a staunch upholder of academic freedom.

He viewed the duties of citizenship in a democratic state with as much earnestness as the proper exercise of his profession. Thus he served on various civic committees, he was a member of the Democratic State Committee for eight years, and he ran for Congress in 1930 and again in 1932. His outstanding services to his party were recognized when he became chairman, first, of the City Democratic Committee, and then of the County Democratic Committee. Still later, his lifelong interest in Labor problems found expression when he took a prominent part in the formation of the Labor Legislative Conference. His election to be its president in December, 1947 was a fitting tribute to his leadership, but less than six months later ill-health forced him to resign the office.

Bretz was a distinguished figure—tall, erect, and dignified. He had a singular youthfulness of spirit and a rare courtesy and graciousness characterized him. His colleagues and a wide circle of friends will not soon forget that striking and kindly presence and that well-modulated voice speaking so persuasively, and will long cherish the memory of one whose intellectual gifts, sterling character, and human sympathy made him for more than forty years a prominent and greatly esteemed member of both the University and the community.

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