

Carl Stephenson

August 10, 1886 — October 3, 1954

Carl Stephenson, eminent mediaeval historian who had served as professor of history at Cornell for 24 years, died on October 3, 1954, three months after he had retired from active teaching.

Professor Stephenson was born on August 10, 1886, at Fayette, Iowa, the son of Julia and Andrew Stephenson. His father was a historian, and as a student of mediaeval history had attended the seminars of Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins University in the company of Charles Homer Haskins. The association of the elder Stephenson with Haskins, who was later a distinguished figure at Harvard, probably caused Carl Stephenson to turn to Harvard for his advanced graduate work, after he had taken the Bachelor's and Master's degrees at De Pauw University. Like most graduate students he mixed his studies with teaching. He had already taught at the University of Arkansas, Princeton, and Harvard when he received his doctor's degree from Harvard in 1914. As a teacher he had further experiences at Washington University, St. Louis, and at Wisconsin, before he came to Cornell as a full professor in 1930. He was a Fellow of the Mediaeval Academy of America and served on committees of the American Historical Association.

The interest in research and writing, which had been aroused in him as a Harvard student, never flagged. A fellowship, granted in 1924 by the Commission for the Relief of Belgium, gave him opportunity to study in Europe, where he worked alongside many historians, notably Henri Pirenne, a mediaevalist of international reputation. These associations Professor Stephenson cherished throughout his life, as is shown by the continuing exchange of books and articles which he and his colleagues maintained across the Atlantic.

The research begun by him at Harvard and carried forward in the libraries of Europe came to focus on the institutions of government in Western Europe, particularly upon the history of taxation in the Middle Ages. Through study of taxation Professor Stephenson, like others, was able to probe into the organization and government of local communities and to deal with such subjects as the history of representation in mediaeval Europe. His first article on the subject, 'The Aids of the English Boroughs', appeared in 1919. His most elaborate and best known work, *Borough and Town: A Study in urban origins in England*, was issued in 1933. Yet these are mere fragments of the scholarly studies that he published in the form of books, essays, and reviews throughout the period 1919-1948.

Drawing on his long experience as a teacher, Professor Stephenson in 1935 wrote a notable text-book, *Mediaeval History: Europe from the fourth to the sixteenth century*; and, in association with F. G. Marcham, he translated

and edited an extensive selection of constitutional documents, *Sources of English Constitutional History*. The textbook, which he carefully amended and adapted in later editions, has become a standard work for college students throughout the United States. The simple organization, direct approach to historical problems, and plain yet vigorous prose, as shown in his writing here, were the hallmark of an unusually gifted teacher.

Many Cornellians will remember his clear, incisive, and carefully planned lectures in the elementary course in mediaeval history. A smaller and select number will cherish the memory of the advanced courses and seminars conducted in his office. In the intimacy of a small group he was able to display and to explain piece by piece illustrations and working models of things mediaeval. In this kind of teaching he was at his best; for no one took more pains than he to understand the hows and whys of castle building or account keeping or land drainage. For him the key to historical knowledge was to know how something worked. He carried this approach into the study of constitutional records where his famous first question to the student was always, 'What does the document say?'

Careful training of this kind was the mark of Professor Stephenson's work with graduate students. Of these he had during his first years at Cornell only a few. As his scholarly reputation spread the number grew; and during the last part of his university career he taught a distinguished group of graduate students from the United States and Canada. His concern for them was deep and abiding. He reported to his colleagues on their academic success as though he were speaking of his own children.

For much of his life Professor Stephenson wrapped himself up almost completely in research and teaching. His only important hobby was stamp collecting, which he followed with his usual exactitude, energy, and success. Then the untimely death of his wife in 1950 was a shock from which he never fully recovered. In the latest years of his life he believed that he had completed the principal task he had set himself as a scholar; and, as the time for retirement approached, he tidied up his office, as it were, and put his scholarly business in order. He taught his last class in May, 1954, and was appointed Professor Emeritus on July 1, 1954. While in retirement he watched, in the making, a volume of essays drawn from his earlier works, which the Cornell University Press was publishing under the title, *Mediaeval Institutions: Selected Essays by Carl Stephenson*. The galleys and the page proofs had passed his careful scrutiny. The book itself was about to appear, when sudden death robbed him of the satisfaction of rounding out his life in this last detail, as he would have wished it.

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