

Damon Boynton

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Damon Boynton was the son of a well-known professor of American literature at the University of Chicago. When he was ten or eleven, his mother, acting on a doctor's advice that she introduce her boys to country life, bought and began to run a small general farm in Old Mystic, Connecticut. There were cows and horses, chickens and ducks, a fine old barn, a beautiful New England pasture with boulders and poison ivy, a pond, and fertile fields, as well as the Mystic River and access to boats and saltwater. Here began a love affair with farm life from which Damon never recovered.

A couple of years at Loomis (now the Loomis-Chafee School) prepared him for Amherst College, where he stayed for one year, and the University of Chicago, where he stayed for another. He finally found himself at Cornell in the College of Agriculture and in the Cornell Dramatic Club, where he also found Mary Fuertes (the daughter of Louis Agassiz Fuertes '97), whom he married when they graduated in the class of 1931. As an undergraduate he majored in agricultural economics (in the days of Warren and Pearson), but as a graduate student he studied pomology under A. J. Heinicke and L. H. MacDaniels. After he got his Ph.D., in 1937, he was appointed assistant professor of pomology in the College of Agriculture and in due course was promoted to full professor, and for the next twenty years or so he was actively involved with extension, research, and teaching in the Department of Pomology.

Boynton made two major contributions to pomology. The first was a detailed study of the soil environment that provides the nourishment and support for woody perennial fruit plants. In it he identified the effects of various physical features of the soil matrix at different depths and different times of the year on water drainage, pore space, and soil aeration. His research showed that those soil-drainage characteristics influence oxygen levels in the pore space and hence have a profound effect on root growth and the absorption of mineral nutrients and water. This pioneering work enhanced the department's ability to advise growers in New York about site selection and dictated the selection of new sites after the heavy tree losses on the poorer sites following the freeze of 1933-34.

His studies of the relationship between the availability of mineral nutrients in the soil and the composition of leaves led to the establishment of the leaf-analysis service, offered by Cornell to New York fruit growers as a means of identifying nutrient deficiencies and excesses before they could adversely affect fruit production and fruit quality. He developed a leaf-color chart that growers could use to measure the nitrogen status of the tree and determine appropriate fertilizers, and he later refined his studies of the effect of various kinds of orchard cultivation on nitrogen levels in fruit trees and developed guidelines for the use of foliar sprays for supplementary nutrition.

In his research and teaching Boynton's interest soon turned to the pomology of regions other than New York State. In 1939 he won a College of Agriculture traveling fellowship to study orchard management and plant nutrition in Great Britain. In 1945, on a Guggenheim Fellowship to study citrus fruits, he spent some time in Puerto Rico, and for the next forty years his chief professional interest was in subtropical and tropical fruits, in their culture, and in the lives and cultures of the people who lived by their cultivation. In 1951-52 he offered a course called "Fruits of the World." Then, in 1953, he was able to combine his interests in pomology, tropical fruits, agricultural education, and Latin American culture during a year's work as acting head of the Crops Department of the Instituto Interamericano de Ciencias Agrícolas at Turrialba, Costa Rica. It was a great year for Boynton and for the scientific study of agriculture in Latin America. At the institute he introduced the first spectrophotometer to improve the analysis of element deficiencies in plant tissue, and he expanded the coffee collection, now the largest in the world. More significant, he focused attention on ways to improve the teaching and research programs in this, the first graduate program in the Southern Hemisphere, and to link them with the development issues of the countries of Latin America. The challenges of rural development, the role of agriculture in improving the lives of millions of poor rural people, and the difference that a few good people could make in this process—these were the themes that Boynton inspired his colleagues with and that he is still remembered for. But the precepts were nourished by the example of a man who had time to supervise the introduction of new varieties and new rootstocks of apple, peach, plum, and pear in the highlands of Guatemala.

When he returned to Cornell and resumed his heavy load of teaching, he also became a member of a committee appointed to reassess the Graduate School, and in 1959 he became dean of the Graduate School. During his five-year term Dean Boynton conceived and directed the creation of the Sage Graduate Center and thereby gave a local habitation to what had been only the name for an administrative, record-keeping academic unit of Cornell with offices tucked into Day Hall. Previously graduate students had discovered one another only in seminars, libraries, and laboratories, and sought in Willard Straight Hall (and in Pop's and in Johnny's) congenial space in which to waste a sullen day together or to brighten one another's perceptions. When the remodeling of old Sage College was completed, the new Graduate Center contained 147 dormitory rooms, several reading rooms and lounges, a music room, a new dining room, and a suite of offices for the dean and administrative staff. The center went far towards identifying and humanizing the Graduate School as an entity of the university, especially for first-year students. (Thanks to Boynton's insistence, the center housed both men and women—in separate wings—and became the first of Cornell's sexually desegregated dormitories.)

But Boynton's chief concern was with the academic quality of the students, of their work, and of the instruction and guidance they received from the faculty. In performing his decanal duties, he won the respect of the faculty and students by his fair-mindedness, by his "total grasp of the job," and by what another of his colleagues later called "his marvelous calm and his dry sense of humor." One of the policy issues he took a strong stand on was the Graduate School's requirement that candidates for a Ph.D. degree present evidence of the ability to read two foreign languages; he opposed those who would reduce or abolish the requirement. More generally, he favored high standards of scholarly discipline in an educational program that enlarged rather than narrowed the lives and the vision of its students.

Among the many extramural committees he served on, two were especially successful because of his leadership: the Committee on Testing of the Association of Graduate Schools and the National Council on the Testing of English as a Foreign Language, both of which he chaired. The second of these eventually solved a difficult problem for graduate schools that drew students from all over the world—some of whom arrived on campus not knowing enough English to do good work in an American university. Boynton had brought to his job as dean an old and abiding interest in educating young scientists from developing countries.

In 1964, at the end of his term as dean of the Graduate School, Boynton resigned from Cornell to become manager of a United Nations project under the Food and Agriculture Organization designed to strengthen advanced programs in scientific agriculture in Latin America. From the project's headquarters in the Tropical Research Center of the Organization of American States at Turrialba, Costa Rica, he traveled to universities and experiment stations all over Latin America, sharing his professional experience with agricultural scientists and teachers. In 1966 he became chief of party of a similar project based in Lima, Peru, and six years later he moved to Santa Tecla, El Salvador, as adviser to a U.S. Department of Agriculture Project in agricultural research. During ten years in the role of an academic and scientific Johnny Appleseed, Boynton made a lasting impression on agricultural education and research in Latin America—and enhanced the fame of Cornell.

Boynton always enjoyed getting out and talking with farmers and seeing how they worked and lived. In the course of such field work in Latin America he became interested in, and impressed by, some of the small farmers who seemed to him to be doing extraordinarily well under very difficult conditions. By this time he had come to recognize that although the Green Revolution had done wonders for increasing world food production, the benefits of these scientific advances had been largely gained by large landholders. Having become especially interested in discovering how research in the agricultural and social sciences could help small farmers build on their own

indigenous knowledge and experience, he welcomed an opportunity to spend his last year in Latin America back in Costa Rica, where, with a team of specialists from Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Costa Rica, he worked on the development and implementation of programs for small farmers.

After returning to Cornell, Boynton helped organize a series of faculty seminars with the Rural Development Committee to exchange ideas and information regarding problems and potentialities of small farmers in the third world in the hope that ideas of practical value would emerge. The series was so successful that someone proposed that the contributions be collected and published in a book to be edited by professors emeriti William F. Whyte and Damon Boynton. While assuming particular responsibility for the contributions of his colleagues in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Boynton took a strong interest in all of the chapters and was especially helpful in suggesting how social scientists could make their contributions most useful to readers who were not social scientists. The book, *Higher-yielding Human Systems for Agriculture*, was published by Cornell University Press in 1984. At the time of his death he was making good progress on a history of horticulture at Cornell.

Damon Boynton was a quiet, modest, wise, capable, and passionate man, in love with life in all its natural forms and fascinated by its symbiotic associations with humanity.

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