

George Plimpton Adams, Jr.

April 27, 1909 — November 13, 1977

George Plimpton Adams, Jr., was born in Berkeley, California, on April 27, 1909, and died in Ithaca on November 13, 1977. He was a member of the Cornell faculty for thirty-seven years, including the years after his emeritus status was conferred when he retired in June 1974.

Adams came from an academic family. His father was the Mills Professor in Moral Philosophy and Civil Polity at the University of California, where he taught for some forty years. The senior Adams was keenly interested in the history of ideas and in political economy (in the older sense of that term), and these also became the dominating intellectual interests of George Adams, Jr. After having been privately educated at Berkeley, he spent a year at the University of California, where he studied classical Greek. Then he transferred to Harvard, where he graduated in philosophy in 1929. He spent the next three years at Robert College in Istanbul, Turkey, where he taught both secondary school and college students, mainly in languages. At the time, Robert College was one of five different campuses of the old Near East College Association, which also included the American College for Girls, whose head for many years was Kathryn Newell Adams, who was his aunt.

Those who knew him felt that George Adams's tour of teaching in Turkey was a lasting influence on his life. The youngsters he taught there came from Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Syria, Iran, Egypt, and even Soviet Georgia. He was thus exposed to enormous cultural variety while making his home in the cultural center of the old Byzantine and later Ottoman empires.

During his tenure at Robert College, Adams met Evelyn Howell Yonker, to whom he became engaged in June 1932, while she was teaching secondary school in the American College for Girls in Istanbul. So great was their love for Turkey and their interest in the rich culture of the entire Near East that Professor and Mrs. Adams returned time and again to Istanbul to spend their sabbatical years.

They were married on June 13, 1934, in Philadelphia, Mrs. Adams's native city. Shortly after, they departed for California, and they lived in Berkeley until 1939. During these years they created a small private school based on the principle of the unity of all learning. In this same period Adams began graduate study in economics at the University of California, where he obtained his Doctor of Philosophy degree in the spring of 1940. During the spring semester of 1940 Adams attended the Brookings Institution in Washington, where he completed his dissertation, later published under the title *Wartime Price Control*.

The Adamsses came to Cornell the following fall to begin an association with Cornell and its Department of Economics that remained intact until 19/4, when he retired. Adams served as chairman of the department for the lengthy period from 1947 to 1958, and during that time he added several distinguished economists to the department. Perhaps the innovation of which he was most proud was the three-semester honors seminar in economics that he introduced after the war. The first semester of this program was devoted to the study of the history of economic ideas, the second to a study of contemporary literature in the field, and the third to the preparation of a senior thesis. This seminar was unvarying in its popularity among the ablest students in the department, and Adams's main problem was to keep its numbers within manageable limits. Some of these students have gone on to academic careers themselves, such as George Wilson, professor at the University of Indiana, and Jack Livingston, professor at Ripon College. Adams took much pride in this seminar because it reflected the deeper interests of his own intellectual life.

Through the influence of his father and the late Frederick J. Teggart, Adams was strongly attracted to the Scottish moral philosophers and to the history of the social sciences. In consequence his classes were both broad and deep in their intellectual content and their sense of history — indeed, the kind of classes that are almost impossible to find in today's academic environment.

Among other influences that shaped his outlook was his family background. Adams was a descendant of an old American puritan family that had its seat in Plimptonville, Massachusetts, where an uncle served as directing head of Ginn and Company, the publishers. Other relatives were *-alvin Plimpton, formerly president of Amherst, and the late Preserved Smith, professor of history at Cornell.

George Adams was at home in many fields of knowledge. He read extensively in history, philosophy, and literature. In economics his central interest was the history of economic ideas from the classical Greek period to modern times. His favorite figure was Alfred Marshall. Like Marshall, Adams understood pure economic theory but at the same time was impatient with abstractions lacking factual content. He was deeply concerned with the institutional arrangements that distinguish particular economic systems and with issues of economic policy in various contexts. He watched with growing impatience and vocal disquiet the contemporary narrowing of economic analysis to a rigid mathematical structure. To him, Keynes's General Theory was not a general theory at all but a rationalization for a particular program of political and economic action appropriate to the special context of the Great Depression.

What kind of man was Adams? Tall in stature, abrupt and rather gruff in speech, and direct in address, Adams was the very model of the authority figure represented by the great professors of all time. In keeping with that

model, he was a diligent, resourceful, and thorough scholar. His lectures were meticulously prepared and intricate both in organization and in scope. As a bibliophile, he knew his literature, how to use it, and how to refer to it. He was an influential teacher, loved by his students, whom he loved in return. It was his rare good fortune to have these students return for visits again and again through the years. Thus his rather formidable personal demeanor, while it served to establish his authority in the classroom, did not conceal the genuine affection that he held toward young people.

Adams was a man of high principles and strong convictions. He could be stern and cutting when faced with what he considered to be palpable nonsense, particularly of the kind that is all too common in faculty politics. Yet he was never petty and he held no grudges. Even his opponents in debate readily conceded his strength of character. He enjoyed a broad measure of respect. By many of us he was loved. We continue to need badly men of his sort and we shall not forget him. He was a strong and positive force, and the University was indeed fortunate to have him in its service for thirty-seven years.

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