

Dexter Perkins

1890 — May 12, 1984

Dexter Perkins, holder of the John L. Senior Professorship at Cornell University from 1954 to 1959, died on May 12, 1984, at the age of 94. He was born in Boston and was educated at Boston Latin School and Harvard University. At Harvard he studied under Archibald Cary Coolidge and Charles Homer Haskins and began his work on the history of the Monroe Doctrine. This subject became the central feature of his research and writing in the middle years of his life. His book on the history of the Monroe Doctrine became the standard work in the field.

The range of his studies reached out into the whole of American foreign policy. He followed the development of the League of Nations, the World Court, and the United Nations; indeed, he took part in the organizational meetings in 1945 that shaped the constitution of the United Nations. The history of American foreign policy and the significance of events in the emerging international politics of his day were the substance of his scholarly career, a career of great variety.

The basis of Perkins's career was his distinguished service at the University of Rochester from 1915 to 1954. He was the first holder of the Pitt Chair in American History and Institutions at Cambridge University, in 1945-46. He lectured at Oxford, at London, at the University of Wales, and in Sweden, Japan, India, and Taiwan. Within the United States he lectured at Harvard, Indiana, Johns Hopkins, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Virginia, Colorado, the National War College, and Wells College, where he held the Campbell Chair for one year.

He was president of the American Historical Association and used his office to urge fellow historians to bring inspiration and vigor to their teaching. He shared in writing *The Education of Historians in the United States*. Throughout his career he kept close to his alma mater, Harvard, where he was a member of the Board of Overseers and chairman of the Harvard Foundation for Advanced Study and Research. He was a frequent adviser to the Harvard Department of History. He organized, directed, and presided over the Salzburg (Austria) Seminar in American Studies.

Perkins was a public lecturer with great gifts, as his career at Cornell University testified. He established a program of weekly lectures addressed to the layman and took as his subjects aspects of American foreign policy and important events and attitudes in the domestic politics of the day. The insight of the historian, wit, vigor, and abounding enthusiasm were the characteristics of his style as a lecturer. Throughout his five years in Ithaca his

lectures drew lively response from the whole community, city folk and academics, to the number of about three hundred, week by week. Some two thousand attended his final lecture in Ithaca.

Deep admiration for Woodrow Wilson was a central feature of his judgment of American foreign policy. Later presidents he appraised according to their attitudes towards international security, the League of Nations, and the United Nations. In Perkins's gallery of successful presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt had a place close to Wilson, but he did not hesitate to show examples of their weaknesses and errors of judgment.

The wife of Dexter Perkins, Wilma Lord Perkins, died at an earlier time. A son and four grandchildren are still living.

Paul W. Gates, Frederick George Marcham, Knight Biggerstaff