

Walter Hoyt French

June 19, 1897 — November 20, 1980

Walter Hoyt French was born on June 19, 1897, in Oak Park, Illinois, and first came to Cornell as an undergraduate. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1920, remained for his Doctor of Philosophy degree, which he received in 1924, rose through the ranks to become professor of English, and continued to teach at Cornell until his retirement. His deep attachment to his department and to Cornell is suggested by his description of himself in *Who's Who* as having been a member of the Cornell English Department since 1917, when one presumes he must have chosen to become an English major.

Professor French's main area of interest and research was medieval studies, and his chief publications were in that field. His *Middle English Metrical Romances*, which he edited in 1930 with Charles Brockway Hall, held the field for many decades as the only scholarly collection of Middle English romances. Reissued in 1964, it is still regarded by many scholars as the best. His *Essays on King Horn*, published in 1940, a study of various aspects of that Middle English poem, made suggestions about its nature and origins that contemporary medievalists still find exciting. Others of his publications explore problems in Chaucer and in Old English as well as in Middle English poetry.

Professor French's academic interests and activities ranged well beyond his area of specialization, however; he taught courses and published articles on modern American poetry, and taught and supervised courses in expository writing. Although he viewed much modern writing with considerable suspicion, he cast a more benevolent eye than many on the then still fledgling program in creative writing. In addition, he for many years administered the Graduate Program in English, virtually single-handedly supervising the selection and admission process, assigning students to advisers, keeping student records, and the like. Apart from his literary pursuits, Professor French maintained an intense interest in music. He is reported to have had such knowledge and keenness of ear as to enable him to listen to entire Beethoven symphonies in his head. And it is further reported that he not infrequently preferred such listening to the sounds of scratchy recordings. Professor French was a member of the Medieval Academy of America, Phi Beta Kappa, and Phi Kappa Phi.

In public, Professor French was generally formal, serious, and reserved, a man admired chiefly for his high principles and fair-mindedness. He is remembered as well by people who worked closely with him and under him for his courtesy and human concern.