

Elias Root Beadle Willis

— *November 22, 1959*

Elias Root Beadle Willis, Associate Librarian, Emeritus, of Cornell University, died on November 22, 1959. Mr. Willis was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1901 with the degree of Bachelor of Arts. He became a secondary school teacher, and in 1913 he enrolled as a graduate student at Cornell where he studied classics and won the degree of Master of Arts in 1915. He was instructor in Greek at Cornell during the academic years 1918-1919 and 1920-1921; later he maintained this connection with teaching and research through membership in Phi Beta Kappa and the American Philological Association.

When Mr. Willis had completed his work for the Master's degree in 1915 he became superintendent of readers' services in the University Library, and here, in the Library, he lived out a long and useful professional life. He became assistant librarian in 1923 and associate librarian in 1930. When the affairs of the Library were managed by an administrative committee from 1929 to 1930, he had the most responsibility for oversight and direction of daily routine; and for a short period in 1946 he was acting librarian. He retired in 1947 and was granted the title Associate Librarian Emeritus.

During the long, busy period of his service to the Library he concerned himself as much with books and their contents as with the large, ever-changing staff—mostly students working part-time—who under his direction brought books from the recesses of the Library to the main desk for distribution to readers. He was a learned man who understood the scholar's problems and talked with authority not only about the merits of different editions and translations of a book but about by-ways of scholarship relating to the classics, literature, and history, studies in which he maintained a lively interest. He was a close friend of the late Professor Carl Becker, who at times sought his advice on questions concerning ancient Greece and Rome and who always put a high value on his judgment. Also he helped Liberty Hyde Bailey by creating the exact and official Latin names appropriate to new varieties of palms discovered by the eminent botanist.

To a whole generation of Cornellians, faculty and students alike, Mr. Willis personified the Library. On entering the main reading room one saw him at a raised desk to the right, sitting by himself, at first sight, as it seemed, an austere and reserved man, his body held erect, his face impassive. To enter the stacks one passed his desk, a busy man's desk, full of slips and notes, call-cards and the time sheets of his student workers. But he was never too

busy to answer a question or help in the search for a book. A question dissolved his austerity. He gave information exactly and generously and with the assurance of one who knew the resources of the Library to be rich and varied. His manner was somewhat withdrawn but self-reliant, his humor dry. He enjoyed conversation not only on points of scholarship, which occupied him most, but on contemporary affairs and even on the annual football game between his own Pennsylvania and Cornell. Nor was his interest in physical recreation merely that of an onlooker; during much of his life he took his exercise by rowing, sometimes journeying stage by stage around Cayuga Lake. In the summer months Mrs. Willis and he established their home on the West Shore of the lake, rowing the mile or so each morning and evening.

He was, until the last years of his life, a trim, vigorous man. In appearance and manner he changed but little. And so it was with his interests. His administrative work he performed quickly, quietly, and efficiently. He and his staff provided readers with the books they needed. Yet he was more than an able administrator. At all times he was in touch with the intellectual life of the University and made his own informal contribution to it. He was a steady, loyal, and warm-hearted companion. By his death our community has lost a man of much knowledge and wisdom, a scholar-librarian.

F. G. Marcham, F. B. Hutt, G. F. Sabine