

George Lincoln Burr

January 30, 1857 — June 27, 1938

George Lincoln was born in Oramel, New York, January 30, 1857. Preparing for college at Cortland Academy in Homer, New York, he entered Cornell University in 1877, graduated in 1881, and was then appointed instructor in History and personal secretary to President Andrew D. White. The years from 1884 to 1888 he spent chiefly in Europe, studying in German, Swiss, and French universities, and collecting books and manuscripts for President White's library. He became assistant professor of History in 1889, professor of History in 1892, professor of Mediaeval History in 1902, and John Stambaugh Professor of History in 1919. From 1890 until his death he was librarian of the President White Library, and from 1924 to 1927 faculty member of the Board of Trustees of Cornell University. In 1896 he served as historical expert on the American commission to determine the boundary of Venezuela. He was associate editor of the *American Historical Review* from 1905 to 1916, and president of the American Historical Association in 1916. In 1904 he received the degree of LL.D. from the University of Wisconsin, and in 1905 the degree of Litt.D. from Western Reserve University. He retired from active teaching in 1922, and died in Ithaca June 27, 1938, at the age of eighty-one years.

As a scholar Professor Burr early acquired an international reputation. His grasp of the general field of history was exceptional, his mastery of historical literature and of historical geography was such as few historians possess, and his knowledge of the special fields of Mediaeval history, the Protestant Reformation, and the history of witchcraft and religious persecution was unrivalled. Much of his time and energy as a scholar was devoted to labors that did not result in publication. As secretary to President White, he contributed so much to the preparation of *The Warfare of Science and Theology* that his name would have been on the title page if he had been willing. He was chiefly responsible for making the President White Library one of the richest collections in the world in the fields of the French Revolution, church history, and the history of witchcraft and persecution; and his marginal notes in the books of that library add substantially to its value for scholars. His published works, all of high distinction, include many articles in periodicals and the collections of learned societies. In addition, he edited *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*; and just before his death he finished reading proof for a work on which he had been engaged for more than twenty years—the completion of an unfinished manuscript on the history of witchcraft left in his care by the late Henry C. Lea.

Professor Burr was a great teacher as well as a great scholar. He once said that a man could teach history or he could teach *through* history. He himself could and did do both. He discouraged his students from taking notes of his lectures; the essential facts he preferred them to get from books; in the class-room he would have them listen to him and try to understand what he was saying. Often enough, no doubt, they failed to understand him fully; but, as William James said of the undergraduates who listened to the lectures of Josiah Royce, they must have had a feeling that something big was going on. Like the rest of us, he was not always at his best. Graduate students who listened to his undergraduate lectures said that he sometimes became so absorbed in erudite comment on the mysteries of bibliography that the hour ended before the lecture began. But not infrequently, getting happily started on some subject of human import and forgetting the formidably bibliographed outlines and the piled-up books which he always brought to class, he would speak as one inspired. Many of us know it well—the moving eloquence with which he would on occasion expound or defend before this faculty the causes that were dear to his heart.

George Burr—how imperishably the name is written into the history of this university and the life of this community! What enduring memories are for many of us associated with this vivid and arresting, this always human and altogether lovable personality! The short, compact, powerful figure of the man, ceaselessly active, tireless as a dynamo, at any hour of the day to be seen slipping in or out of the library, hurrying across the campus, hurrying down the hill, and, with unabated and triumphant vitality, hurrying up again. The richly stored and alert mind, keen as a Damascus blade, slaying the spurious and the inept with the deftest wit, pouring forth a wealth of relevant and curious lore for the illumination of matters great or small, and, on rare occasions, exploding into detonating wrath when goaded past endurance by the senselessly stupid, the malicious, or the cruel act. The indefatigable scholar and bibliophile, browsing and brooding in the stacks, with the still concentration of the mystic poring over some rare manuscript, or with loving touch caressing the frayed covers of ancient books. And not least the fellow man, ever friendly and ever gracious, meeting with equal courtesy and consideration the humble and the exalted, and ever ready with unfailing generosity to lend himself to the promotion of any worthy cause or the relief of any human need. No man ever better exemplified the rule of plain living and high thinking. No man was ever more tolerant of other's frailties, or less tolerant of his own. Valiant and intrepid crusader in the cause of human freedom and enlightenment! If there be any intangible possession that distinguishes this university it is the tradition of freedom united with responsibility—freedom to do what one chooses, responsibility for what it is that one chooses to do. On this memorial occasion it is altogether fitting for us to recall that no one ever did more than George Lincoln Burr to endow Cornell University with this priceless possession.