

George Holland Sabine

December 7, 1880 — January 18, 1961

George Holland Sabine, one of Cornell's most distinguished scholars and teachers, died just after passing his eightieth birthday. Until several months prior to the end, Professor Sabine lived "in the midst of life," continuing lifelong habits of scholarship, writing, and editing. Throughout his life he was an excellent illustration of the statement of Montaigne that "we are born to inquire after truth." He was thus fortunate in his death as he was in life; for almost as soon as work became impossible for him, life itself became impossible and glided softly into death.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, Professor Sabine received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Cornell in 1903 and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1906. He taught philosophy at Stanford University from 1907 to 1914, at the University of Missouri from 1914 to 1923, and at Ohio State University from 1923 to 1931. He returned to Cornell in 1931 and served as Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy until his retirement in 1948. From 1940 to 1944 he was also Dean of the Graduate School, and from 1943 to 1946 he was Vice President of the University, in which position he was concerned chiefly with academic matters.

Following his retirement, Professor Sabine was Visiting Professor at the University of Washington, Seattle, at the University of Oregon, and at Northwestern University.

For the last four years of his life, following the death of his wife, Professor Sabine lived at Telluride. In 1957 he delivered the Telluride lectures at Cornell —three lectures on Marxism that were heard by many hundreds of students at Bailey Hall. They were subsequently published as a monograph by Cornell University Press. At the time of his death he was active as one of the editors of the *Philosophical Review*.

Professor Sabine held honorary degrees from Union, Kenyon, and Oberlin Colleges, the University of Missouri, and Ohio State University, and he was President of the American Philosophical Association. When he became professor emeritus in 1948, there was presented to him a *Festschrift* prepared by a group of colleagues and former students: *Essays in Political Theory Presented to George H. Sabine*, published by Cornell University Press.

The most important of Professor Sabine's works was *A History of Political Theory*. This work has been translated into Greek, Italian, Japanese, Arabic, and Indonesian, and at the time of his death the publisher was negotiating for Hebrew, Hindi, and other translations. The book is probably the most widely read and cited work on the subject

in any language. Professor Sabine revised the book in 1950; and he completed the second revision several months before his death.

Professor Sabine had a lifelong special interest in seventeenth-century English political theories. Out of this interest came *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, which he edited, with a long introduction, and which was published by Cornell University Press in 1941. One of his most perceptive essays was the one he wrote on Jean Bodin for the *Festschrift* in honor of George Lincoln Burr, who was one of his closest friends. (For other publications by Professor Sabine, reference may be made to the bibliography in the *Festschrift*.)

Professor Sabine himself provided clues of his approach to political ideas. It is impossible, he said, to arrive at the truth of any allegation of fact through logic; and one cannot reach a value through either fact or logic; therefore, the combination of these three operations, as in Hegelianism or Marxism, means only intellectual confusion. Values are always “the reaction of human preference to some state of social and physical fact.” From the standpoint of social relativism, then, one cannot find support for democratic ideals in metaphysical beliefs; nor may these ideals be established in scientific propositions, for “hopes and ideals are not facts to be seen or theorems to be proved.” These ideals, like all moral values, “in the last resort are matters of choice,” and hence their authority must be found within man—in his heart, will, desire. “At some point,” he said, “a nation confronts its final conviction about what it is possible for human life to be and what they desire that it should become, and upon that choice they build their civilization and so they make their place in history. On that conviction it has to stake its life and fortune.”

Time and again Professor Sabine reiterated his position that “any clearheaded theory of politics requires discrimination between states of fact, causal connections, formal implications, and the values or ends that a policy is designed to achieve.” While in any political philosophy these factors are combined, “no combination can alter the fact that they are logically different and that conclusions about them are differently warranted.” While he was convinced that no man can stand apart from the values of his culture, he was equally convinced “that there is in intelligence and good will a power of discrimination and of intellectual honesty that is not wholly limited either by nationality or by social class.” For this conviction he was indebted, he said, “to the tradition of liberalism itself,” and hence he saw himself “forced to see in that tradition the most hopeful prospect for social and political improvement by peaceful means.”

Thus, the separation of the realms of logic, facts, and values did not make it impossible for Professor Sabine to develop his own configuration of values. He took his stand for civil liberties, intellectual freedom, and the use

of the intelligence in the peaceful solution of social problems. These beliefs were not, however, abstractions to Professor Sabine. They were tools with which he worked, from day to day, as a scholar, teacher, administrator, and, above all, as a thinker.

Professor Sabine influenced his students not by making them disciples or followers but by freeing their minds. No school can be built on what he taught. What mattered, and mattered greatly, was how he taught: he gave constant evidence of a richly endowed, sternly disciplined, liberal, free intelligence at work. Above his seminar door there might have been the inscription that Montaigne had for his library: "I do not understand; I pause; I examine."

But often he did not have enough time to examine; he pointed to unanswered questions. Often a bright, eager student noted the question, and years later he undertook his own scholarly investigation; and thus, through the stimulation of other minds, Professor Sabine opened up lines of inquiry and was justly credited, in private or public acknowledgements, with the seed that bore fruit in the works of other scholars.

Professor Sabine's physical presence was itself impressive. He was tall, well built, and gave the impression of muscularity. As a young man he had worked in a blacksmith shop and always enjoyed working with his hands, particularly with carpentry and a cabinetmaker's tools. Perhaps he expressed with his hands the same quality of spirit that was prominent in his work: a desire to see things cleanly and honestly done. The same instinct probably accounted for his lifelong interest in fine prints and etchings, which he collected with the knowledge of the expert and with the feeling of the amateur. If there was anything that he hated, it was humbug, whether in work, thought, or feeling, and he tested himself by the same demands that he made of others.

Professor Sabine takes his place in the annals of Cornell alongside Andrew D. White, Carl L. Becker, and Liberty Hyde Bailey: men who brought the world to Cornell and Cornell to the world.

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