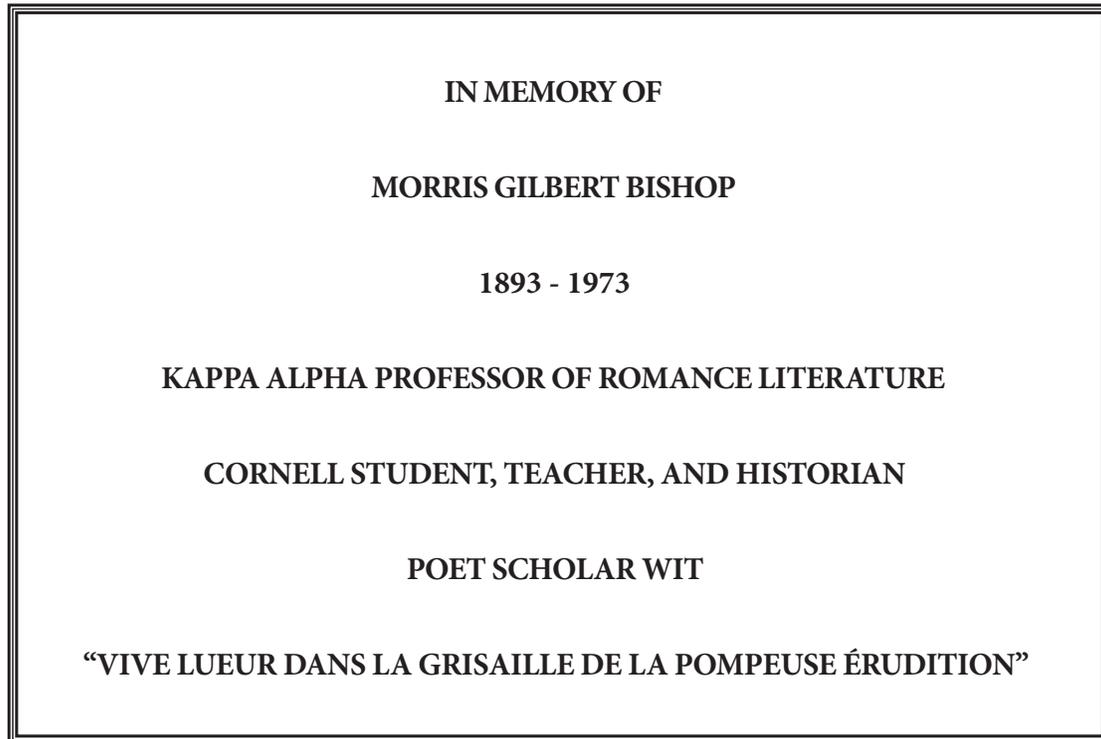


Morris Gilbert Bishop

April 15, 1893 — November 20, 1973



So reads the bronze plaque placed on the wall of Sage Chapel as a tribute to Morris Bishop's association with Cornell, his long and devoted service to the University, and to the rare quality of the man. The plaque reminds us that he did, indeed, as writer and teacher enliven his most serious scholarship with shafts of wit and gentle irony.

Born in Willard, New York, the son of Dr. Edwin R. Bishop, he entered Cornell with a scholarship in 1910, earned the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1913, and the M.A. a year later. His first employment was in Boston with the educational publishers, Ginn and Company (1914-17). The concern kept his position for him throughout his military service. First, he joined a Boston cavalry troop and served under the command of General Pershing during the Texas border war against Pancho Villa (1916). Then he was a lieutenant in the infantry in World War I, after which he worked with the American Relief Administration in Finland. His third wartime experience was during World War II when he served for three years in the Office of War Information in New York, London, France and Luxembourg.

After World War I Morris Bishop worked in advertising in New York. He returned to Cornell in 1921 and received the Ph.D. in 1926. Appointed instructor in the Department of Romance Languages, promoted to professor in

1936, he was named two years later to the newly created Kappa Alpha Chair in Romance Literature. Retirement as emeritus professor in 1960 ended neither his association with Cornell nor his remarkable productivity as a writer. In anticipation of the centennial celebration, President Deane W. Malott commissioned Morris Bishop to write a full-scale history of Cornell. The result was an eminently readable combination of research, anecdotes, memories and wit.

Morris Bishop's professional career was varied and rich with honors. In 1951 he was chosen Fulbright Visiting Professor in American Literature and Civilization in Athens, Greece. Deeply involved for many years in the work of the Modern Language Association, he was elected president of that large and heterogeneous body in 1964. He was named to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. After his retirement he held visiting professorships at Wells College, Rice

University and the University of Indiana. For his work with the American Relief Administration he was named a Knight of the White Rose (Finland); France honored him as Officier d'Academie (1938) and as Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur (1947). He was awarded honorary degrees by the University of Rennes in France, Laval University in Quebec, and several American institutions.

Cornellians tend to think of Morris Bishop as particularly their own, as in a sense he was. As an undergraduate he was an outstanding student, graduating in three years, was honored by membership in Phi Beta Kappa, and won the Morrison Poetry Prize, an award which so encouraged him that he recently contributed funds to ensure annual awards in the future. Both as undergraduate and as a young faculty member he wrote for the *Cornell Daily Sun* and was a star contributor to the *Sun's* once famous Berry Patch column. For over sixty years he took part in University activities that ranged from the frivolous to the ceremonial, from a hilarious "Masque" in the White Art Museum, or a reading of "Peter and the Wolf" in Bailey Hall, to reading Scripture at Christmastime in a crowded Sage Chapel. His colleagues nominated him a faculty trustee, in which capacity he served from 1957 to 1961. For a number of years Morris Bishop acted as marshal at the Commencement exercises, pronouncing the names of doctoral candidates, regardless of their nationality, in stentorian tones of great style and authority. Asked by a colleague how he managed such a feat, he responded, "Why, I just pronounce the names as though they were correct," adding that it was perhaps the first time the candidate realized how his name should sound. Later, and on one occasion with notable drama, Morris Bishop was Commencement macebearer. Still later, he opened the ceremonies with welcoming comments, usually on some Cornell theme. In 1972, for example, he spoke of the

Cornell character, the belief “in the fundamental goodness of men and women, in the world’s betterment through the individual’s struggle for good, in the reality of duty and decency and self-sacrifice, in the rejection of meanness and cruelty and double-dealing, in personal honor as a sufficient guide and goal of behavior.”

Morris Bishop was a conscientious citizen of Ithaca. He was a member of the Unitarian Church, and he supported with his presence and his purse the causes he believed in. Among these were the Tompkins County Historical Society and Historic Ithaca.

Very early Morris Bishop began writing light verse and prose for the old *Life*, *Judge* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Later, like his friends Frank Sullivan and E. B. White, he was for many years associated with the *New Yorker* magazine to which he contributed chiselled and charming light verse as well as frequent prose pieces. Three books of his verse resulted, and many of the *New Yorker* writings have reappeared widely in anthologies.

But it was as a scholar and man of letters that Morris Bishop was especially esteemed in this country and abroad. A man of wide culture, at home in many languages, he cared deeply about good literary style and practiced it with elegance and deceptive simplicity all his many years. His special forte was history cast in the biographical mold, so written as to bring the past and its actors to a broad literate public. Frank Sullivan was so impressed by his energy, enthusiasm and breadth of interest as a writer and scholar that he believed Morris Bishop had “been privately blessed with a 48-hour day.” His output was indeed prodigious, numbering more than four hundred published works, including sixteen books. Among these one may single out his biographies of Blaise Pascal, of Samuel de Champlain, of the Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca, of Ronsard, the poet of the French Renaissance, and of the French ironist and writer of maxims, La Rochefoucauld.

During the last dozen years of Morris Bishop’s life he wrote historical and biographical articles for *Horizon* and *American Heritage*, and was the author of the *Horizon Book of the Middle Ages*. At the time of his death he had just completed a study of St. Francis of Assisi, soon to appear, and was working on a biography of Cola di Rienzi.

Among Morris Bishop’s most memorable contributions was his work on Petrarch. A series of lectures at the University of Indiana in 1962 grew into a book, *Petrarch and His World*, a remarkably perceptive study of that complex and humane genius with whom, both as scholar and poet, he had a profound affinity. This affinity made him not only a splendid portrayer of Petrarch the man, but translator of his *Letters* and many of the *Rime*. Late in his retirement Morris Bishop was an obvious choice to be curator of Cornell’s great Fiske Petrarch collection, of

which he finished a new annotated catalogue. For his contributions to Petrarch scholarship, at a World Petrarch Congress held in Washington in April 1974, on the 600th anniversary of the death of the Italian poet and humanist, Morris Bishop was awarded posthumously a commemorative gold medal as one of six great American “Italianisti.”

A humanist in the real sense of the word, Morris Bishop looked upon the world with perception and an ironic eye, with kindness and a saving sense of the absurd — including some of the absurdities of academic life. He was a warm friend, a stimulating companion, ever generous in his encouragement to aspiring writers. Not the least of his legacies must be a heightened and lasting appreciation of good writing among those who admired him.

In all of his interests he was ably assisted and encouraged by his wife, Alison Mason Kingsbury, an artist who illustrated many of his books. His wife, their daughter, Alison (Mrs. A. R. Jolly of the class of 1958), and four grandchildren survive this much loved teacher.

John C. Adams, Henry Guerlac, Deane W. Malott, Paul M. O’Leary, Blanchard L. Rideout