

# Benton Sullivan Monroe

*February 6, 1873 — December 13, 1968*

Benton Sullivan Monroe was a member of the University for seventy-six years. He taught his first class at Cornell in 1897, his last, forty-eight years later, in 1945. Though he was not the kind of man to claim credit merely for great age, he did enjoy recalling that he had known all seven Cornell presidents and as a toddler had been lifted up by his parents at a public ceremony to see Ezra Cornell. His long life was centered with unusual firmness in the University and the University city. As a student he moved into 531 East State Street, part way between campus and business district, and there he lived until his last illness required his removal. He studied at no other university and declined to teach even temporarily at any other. Travel attracted him not at all until he was in his fifties, and even then he was never away very far or very long. All his enthusiasms were in Ithaca.

In the University he is best remembered as a versatile teacher and a sagacious committeeman. His pupils recall him as a kindly but exacting professor, who controlled his classroom without raising his voice, who gave the impression of reserves of knowledge ready if they should need to be called up, and who could twinkle benignly at an abysmally unprepared student even while writing an unmistakable F in his grade book. In his later years he taught Old and Middle English, the history of the language, and the literature of the eighteenth century. But over the full run, as the old *Announcements* show, he had taught almost all the traditional English courses. In so doing he reflected the training of his master, James Morgan Hart, Cornell's first professor of English literature. When asked why, in spite of his mainly philological experience and interest, he read Byron oftener than Beowulf and would as soon teach Walter Scott as William Langland, he replied simply, "I am a Hart man." Only contemporary literature stood outside his interests. The modern novel bored him and modern poetry repelled him.

Committee and administrative work, however, neither bored nor repelled him, whether such duties were within or without the walls. He was secretary of the Graduate Faculty from 1917 to 1941, acting dean of the Graduate School at three periods, chairman of the English Department in the year before his retirement, secretary of the faculty of arts and sciences from 1911 to 1913, secretary to the Administrative Board of Summer Sessions from 1919 to 1933, and reader for the College Entrance Examination Board from 1911 to 1930.

The city laid similar claims upon him. He was a member of the Civil Service Commission from 1921 to 1940 and chairman from 1938 to 1940, secretary of the old Town and Gown Club for thirty-five years, city archivist for twenty-one years, city historian at two periods, an ardent member of the DeWitt Historical Society for as

long as anyone can now remember, an active worker for the Ithaca Community Chest and treasurer in 1925, and a charter member of the Ithaca Rotary Club, of which he was an organizer in 1914 and president in 1917-18. Downtown Ithaca recognized the devotion of its distinguished citizen by honoring him on his ninetieth birthday at a testimonial dinner attended by the academic, industrial, professional, and business leaders of both city and county.

Complaisant and agreeable as he was, in a few matters “Ted” Monroe declined to conform to traditional patterns and legends of professorial life and insisted on following his own notions of what was right and good. For instance, though the light in his library burned long hours every night, he published very little. He refused to celebrate in print every discovery or insight that rewarded his study. He imparted these findings in the classroom, in conference with graduate students, or in correspondence with other scholars. He did contribute occasionally to *Dialect Notes*, *Modern Philology*, and the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, but he probably appeared oftener in the prefaces of others than in pieces of his own. He disliked giving public lectures and felt no obligation to attend annual meetings of the professional associations. On the other hand, he would stop at nothing to track down, say, the first occurrence of a dialectal form or a variant spelling, and he assembled for such purposes a huge library, beautifully indexed and carefully annotated.

His recreations were few. In athletics, either as participant or spectator, he had no interest. But a love of horses, formed when he was a boy on his father’s farm near Romulus, carried over into his adult life. He was famous in this part of the country for his “spanking” teams of matched carriage horses, for his care in grooming them, and for his skill and style in driving them. When horses could no longer be stabled in the city, he abandoned personal transportation entirely. He refused ever to own a car, and even disliked to ride in one. He became a notable walker and perhaps is best remembered by townspeople today as a vigorous pedestrian, striding up and down the Ithaca hills with a tireless lope, carrying sometimes a reticule for convenience and sometimes a walking stick for style.

Style, whether in prose, horsemanship, whist, or dress, meant a good deal to Ted Monroe. Early photographs show him as a man consciously well tailored, and even in his later years he was unusually observant and smart in dress. Style also characterized his speech. His voice, though throaty, was pleasant and controlled, his ordinary conversation formal and only rarely colloquial. He wore a steady smile, and though he could differ sharply and argue powerfully, he was not known to show anger.

Benton Sullivan Monroe was born in Romulus, New York, on February 6, 1873, attended Ithaca High School to prepare himself for Cornell, and entered the University in the autumn of 1892. He took his degree with Phi Beta

Kappa honors with the class of 1896 and immediately entered the Graduate School. In 1897 he received the A.M. degree and was appointed assistant in English. In 1900, a candidate for the doctorate, he was appointed instructor in rhetoric and English philology. He received the Ph.D. in 1902, became assistant professor of English in 1912, professor in 1931, and professor emeritus in 1941. He was recalled to teaching duties during the war years and taught until his second retirement in 1945. On June 25, 1903, he married Nina Elston in the living room of her parents' house at 531 East State Street, the house that had been his home in Ithaca before the marriage, and that was to remain the residence of the hospitable Monroes for the rest of their long and admirable lives.

*James Hutton, W. M. Sale, Jr., George H. Healey*