

LYLE HENRY WRIGHT

Lyle Henry Wright, librarian and bibliographer of American fiction, was born in Watertown, New York, on November 6, 1903. His parents, Arthur Frederick and Mabel Edith (Wood) Wright moved in 1912 to California, settling in Cudahy. Lyle attended local schools and, after graduating from Huntington Park High School in 1921, enrolled in the Southern Branch of the University of California (now UCLA). Then he found his calling. As he expressed it later to Clarence Brigham when he accepted membership in the American Antiquarian Society, 'No degree should appear after my name. My part-time work at the Huntington Library during college days blossomed into a full-time job in my junior year. Since that time I have lived with and for books and a richer life I could not ask for.'

Beginning in the photostat department in October 1923, he turned to bibliographical work in February 1928 when he was appointed assistant to the early English bibliographer, Cecil Kay Edmonds, who had come with Mr. Huntington's books from New York City. On August 16, 1928, he married Marjorie Brown, secretary to Director Max Farrand and the first woman on the staff. The birth of a retarded boy, their only child, in 1931 brought Marjorie and Lyle into the parents' movement to extend and improve facilities for the retarded. Their success with the California effort and his editorship of *The ECF Bulletin* of the Exceptional Children's Foundation (1950-52) pleased Lyle as much as any of his bibliographical achievements. In 1942 he joined the U.S. Army Air Corps as a second lieutenant, rising to the rank of captain in the Western Flying Training Command.

He returned to the library in December 1945 as bibliographer and acting head of the reference department, an appointment confirmed in 1947 and held until his retirement in June 1966. Through 1971 he acted as consultant, part-time, in col-

lecting American fiction for the Huntington, often working in concert with his library colleague Mary Isabel Fry. He died in Midway City on November 24, 1979, survived by his wife and son.

No one can work in a research library like the Huntington without aspiring to original work, but few librarians realize their ambition. Early in the 1930s Wright projected a bibliography of eighteenth-century English fiction, but he abandoned the idea when he learned that an English scholar had begun work. Any student of English literature who knows Wright's work will regret his decision. Fifty years later there is still no proper bibliography of English fiction, while Wright's thorough coverage of the American field extends from the beginning in 1774 through 1900.

By 1933 Wright had turned his thoughts to American fiction, and on June 24 he initiated an association with the American Antiquarian Society that proved to be crucial to both bibliography and collecting when he wrote to the librarian, R. W. G. Vail, to seek advice. By return mail Vail offered encouragement. Such a bibliography was needed, he wrote, and it should include all works published separately through 1840 or 1850. By 1934 when he transferred to Americana as W. O. Waters's assistant, Wright had compiled guides to Huntington's sporting books and books on the sea, had sent notes on Huntington's English fiction to the bibliographer Andrew Block, and had built up a file of some 275 early American novels at the Huntington. Two years later Max Farrand and Leslie E. Bliss granted research leave and travel funds and guaranteed publication, so Wright came East in 1937 to survey major libraries, starting in Chicago and continuing from Washington to Worcester.

Wright had developed a streamlined form of entry by shortening titles, regularizing imprints, and reporting only the last numbered page as his collation, so he could collect citations easily and check them quickly against card catalogues or books.

For publication he would add locations of copies and notes of the period, locale, or subject of a story. Already he had absorbed Oscar Wegelin's pioneer notes, which had covered the field from 1774 through 1830, but for the last twenty years of his period Wright was the pioneer and library collections were his only practical sources. No wonder, then, that the Antiquarian Society was the high point of his tour or that Clarence Brigham became his idol. The martinis at Brigham's Sunday lunches were an unforgettable complement to their growing friendship, but the bibliography was their stimulant. Brigham, the supreme collector, got his desiderata lists and Wright, the bibliographer, got his Worcester locations and unrecorded items. Soon to join Vail and Brigham as friends who exchanged notes with Wright were John S. Van E. Kohn of Collector's Bookshop and later of Seven Gables Bookshop, foremost among numerous antiquarian booksellers whose help Wright encouraged, and Jacob Blanck of the *Bibliography of American Literature*, principal among specialists in the field whose respect Wright earned.

In 1939 *American Fiction 1774-1850*, Wright's first 'contribution toward a bibliography,' was published. Further contributions appeared every nine years. In 1948 a revised edition of Wright I, so called, increased the record to 2,772 entries, adding 'approximately 600 more, including both titles and editions, than were recorded in the first edition.' In 1957 Wright II, *American Fiction 1851-1875*, recorded 2,832 titles. *Additions and Corrections* to Wright II were issued separately and appended to a reprint in 1965. Finally Wright III, *American Fiction 1876-1900*, published in 1966, completed the record by adding another 6,175 titles. Altogether Wright discovered and described 11,779 books and pamphlets and located copies of nearly all of them in at least one American library. The consistency and accuracy of Wright's work has never been questioned, and items 'not in Wright' occur so infrequently

that they merely remind us of Wright's major achievement as a bibliographer.

Wright, having been preceded by Henry R. Wagner, was the second member from southern California when he was elected to the Society at the fall meeting in 1953. He responded to Brigham that it was 'one of the most startling and happy surprises that I have ever experienced.' He spent January 1955 at the Society on Wright II while Brigham did his part by collecting the books at the rate of one thousand titles a year. Invited to deliver a paper at the spring meeting, he fell ill so his old friend William A. Jackson read for him 'A Few Observations on American Fiction.' Brigham remembered him as 'a friendly and able scholar.' Modest, helpful, and productive, he remains a model at his own library and for scholar-librarians everywhere. He contributed to the daily life of his library and to the life's blood of research—bibliography.

Roger E. Stoddard

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