

Obituaries

RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON

Ray Allen Billington, distinguished historian of the American frontier and the westward movement and senior research associate at the Huntington Library, died at his home in San Marino, California, on March 3, 1981, at the age of seventy-seven.

Professor Billington was known best both for the number of his scholarly works in American history—he had published twenty-six books at the time of his death—and as a defender of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous hypothesis that American institutions and the American character had been shaped by the demands and exigencies of the frontier experience. Although Billington explored the frontier thesis in many ways and in many volumes, one of his most impressive contributions was a careful examination of Turner himself; his biography, *Frederick Jackson Turner, Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (1973) won the Bancroft Prize for American History in 1974.

To associate Ray Billington exclusively with the frontier, however, is to miss the range of his scholarship, which included an American history survey text, political history, the editing of diaries, consulting work, and the founding of *The Histories of the American Frontier* series, embracing volumes on the Latin American and Mexican frontiers. He was also influential as a teacher and as an active leader in the historical profession. But certainly his impact on the academic and scholarly world was made the greater by his open, friendly manner and the absolute delight he took in encouraging young scholars. He communicated enthusiasm for research and writing that infected everyone around him. Whether it was as a neophyte assistant professor at Clark University, or as a teacher of

American social history at Smith College, or as the tremendously popular rapid-fire professor at Northwestern University, where he taught for nineteen years, Billington left an indelible mark on his students. His ability to make a fact-filled narrative come to life with vivid stories and wit was known throughout the historical profession. In 1963, after having taught thousands of undergraduates and having guided scores of graduate students to their doctorates, Professor Billington was invited to join Allan Nevins as a senior research associate at the Huntington Library in San Marino. There, for nearly two decades more, he persuaded many hundreds of scholars both from the United States and abroad to study new areas of American history, particularly the American West. The seminars, luncheon meetings, and postlunch walks that Professor Billington arranged for the visiting scholars at the Huntington made a research stay there an unforgettable experience.

Born in Bay City, Michigan, in 1903, Billington attended the University of Wisconsin, where he received a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1926. A year later he was awarded a master's degree in American history at the University of Michigan. He continued his graduate work at Harvard University, where Arthur M. Schlesinger directed his dissertation, 'Social Backgrounds of the Know-Nothing Party'; after receiving his doctorate in 1933, he published a revised and expanded version entitled *The Protestant Crusade* (1938).

While he was still working on completing his Harvard degree, Billington began teaching at Clark University. Twenty years later, he told Clifford K. Shipton, then director of the American Antiquarian Society, that 'the magnificent resources that you provided made possible a thesis that won me the degree and eventually made a book.' Billington also recalled that the first two years he spent working at the Society 'were among the best ever.' After six years as a member of the Clark faculty he accepted a position at Smith College in 1937, where he soon became a full professor. In 1944 he moved to North-

western University, and in 1949 was named the William Mason Smith Professor of History, a post he held until he was invited to the Huntington in 1963.

Billington's fascination with the American frontier began at Harvard when he took a seminar taught by Frederick Merk, who was himself Turner's successor. That interest soon led not only to courses on the West but to the publication of a seminal text, *Westward Expansion*, in 1949. Now in its fifth edition, it has remained one of the most enduringly popular accounts of the westward movement. The superbly written narrative account and the imposing bibliography have benefitted fellow scholars as well as students. *Westward Expansion* was followed by Billington's volume in the New American Nation series, *The Far Western Frontier: 1830-1860* (1956), which incorporates some of the brilliant lectures he gave at Oxford when he was the Harmsworth Professor of American History. Billington then decided that the monographic studies of the American frontier had reached the point that a multi-volume synthetic history of the frontier could be written by the leading scholars in the field. In 1962 he launched his *Histories of the American Frontier* series. He was both series editor and the author of a thoughtful volume, *America's Frontier Heritage* (1966), in which he acknowledged the criticisms of the Turner thesis and brought forth revisions of his own. By the time of his death, a dozen volumes on different periods or regions had appeared in one open-ended series, and a dozen more were being considered.

Meanwhile, other volumes and articles on other aspects of frontier and western history appeared from the pleasant and always accessible second-story office in the Huntington Library. In the mid-seventies Billington began to explore the meaning of the frontier experience for other nations. The result was yet another elegantly written, learned, and original book: *Land of Savagery | Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier* (1980), which used the writings of

European novelists, travelers, and public spokesmen to establish once and for all the importance of the frontier concept in the minds of other societies and other cultures. In so doing, Billington gave the idea of the American frontier as a land of savagery and promise an intellectual and psychological context and meaning which had been lacking; Billington's writings spanned those years in which the whole Turner thesis was under severe attack by historians and critics. His exemplary scholarship, his own positive reinterpretation of Turner, and his placement of the frontier hypothesis in the perspective of social and intellectual history in his last major book won for Billington a secure place in the pantheon of distinguished American historians.

Professor Billington's scholarship was recognized in scores of ways during his lifetime. In 1953 he was appointed Harmsworth Professor at Oxford, only four years after *Westward Expansion* had appeared. In 1959 he was elected president of the American Studies Association and in 1962 he became president of the Organization of American Historians (then called the Mississippi Valley Historical Association). When the Western History Association was founded in 1961 Billington was its first president. He also served on the boards of learned societies and as an editorial consultant to a number of presses. The award of an honorary M.A. degree by Oxford in 1953 was followed by LITT.D.'s from Bowling Green University (1958) and from Redlands University, and an LL.D. from both Park College and the University of Toledo. After he was made a member of the American Antiquarian Society in 1965—an honor he confessed to Marcus McCorison that he had always coveted—he was unstinting in his loyalty and support to the Society.

Yet none of the above facts or descriptions can capture the rare qualities of character, intellectual vigor, and comradeship that his fellow historians and students so admired in Ray Billington. He and his wife, Mabel, were quintessentially hospi-

table. 'I wish you were here to swell the number around the lunch table,' he wrote a friend in 1979. A few months before his death, he wrote exuberantly of the manuscript of a young colleague whose research he had guided: 'It is a superb volume, meticulously done, fresh in its concepts, sparkling with new ideas, and in all a joy to read.' His enthusiasm and zest for American history, ideas, learning, and people made Ray Billington a gifted scholar and the friend and supporter of all those around him. He is survived by his wife, Mabel Crotty Billington, a daughter, Ann Schmitt, of France, and a son, Allen, of Michigan.

Howard R. Lamar

LESTER JESSE CAPPON

Lester Jesse Cappon, director emeritus of the Institute of Early American History and Culture and fellow emeritus of the Newberry Library, died of a heart attack in Chicago on August 24, 1981. He was eighty. It was entirely typical of his continuing intellectual vigor and dedication to scholarship that this distinguished historian, archivist, geographer, and bibliographer should have had two articles in press and the draft of a book review just completed on the day of his death.

Born in Milwaukee on September 18, 1900, Lester received a diploma from the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music in 1920. He subsequently earned the B.A. degree in 1922 and the M.A. degree in 1923 from the University of Wisconsin. Entering Harvard University and working under Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., he took a second master's degree in 1925 and received his doctorate in 1928.

By the time that he completed a dissertation on the early iron industry in Virginia, Lester had already begun a distinguished career in 1926-27 as research associate at the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at the University of Virginia.

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