

GEORGE C. D. ODELL

George Clinton Densmore Odell was born at Newburgh, New York, on March 19, 1866, a son of Benjamin Barker and Ophelia (Bookstaver) Odell. His father had been mayor of Newburgh, and his elder brother, Benjamin B., was to become governor of New York, but he had none of their inclinations toward business and politics. Instead, at the age of ten he began to spend all of his money on pictures of actresses (he did not mention actors), but his subsequent career in that direction was quite the reverse of what one might expect from this symptom. From the Siglar Preparatory School in Newburgh he went to Columbia College in order to be near the center of the American theater. His years as a student (1885-1893) were great years for the New York stage and fixed his determination to make the study of it his life work. His doctoral dissertation on *Simile and Metaphor in the English and Scottish Ballads* (1892) was only a detour from the stage, for his first work after taking his Ph.D. in 1893 was the preparation of school texts of *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V*.

In 1895 Odell was recalled to the Department of English at Columbia, and in 1924 he was appointed professor of dramatic literature, a post which he retained until he became emeritus in 1939. His stature as a scholar was first recognized outside of his university in 1920 when there appeared his *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, the most careful study of Shakespeare on the London stage which had ever been completed. From this he proceeded to his life work, a detailed study of the New York stage from its origins in the eighteenth century until, he originally hoped, 1910. There is no other study of the theater comparable with these great *Annals*, the first volume of which appeared in 1927. His research was prodigious, for he covered even the small

theaters of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and the suburbs on Long Island. For most of these the only extensive records were the village newspapers which, for the most part, had to be sought out in the offices of the printers. The care with which he worked, and the accuracy of the great volumes which he turned out, were incredible. They constitute, because of the place of New York in the theatrical world, a history of the whole American stage. Works of such scope and volume are often projected but rarely completed to the point where they are of value. Odell did, indeed, fall short of his later, more modest, goal of the end of the nineteenth century, but his volume 15, which appeared this year, carried his work to the summer of 1894. Few men have so few distractions from their work, for he lived quietly in a small hotel and never married.

Although Odell was almost theatrically handsome, tall, slender, and straight, he had none of the flamboyant mannerisms one associates with theatrical people. He was gentle, shy, retiring, and so modest that he was surprised and grateful when anyone praised his *Annals*. We first came to know him when he visited the library to work in our New York newspapers. In later years he was of great help in the identification of dubious items in our own vast collection of theatrical material, which Mr. Brigham was then arranging. When he was elected to the Society in 1945 he wrote: "I shall enter the always hospitable Library with the feeling that I now belong there—that I am coming home." He took small part in the activities of such societies as this, but among his honors was a gold medal for achievement in history awarded to him by the New York Historical Society in 1942. After two years of sickness he died at his home in the Hotel Seymour on October 17, 1949. He leaves three nieces and two nephews, Herbert R. and Hiram B. Odell.

C. K. S.

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