

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

HERBERT DEAN MERITT (1904 – 1984)

On August 20 at 9 p.m. Herbert Dean Meritt died at Beverley Manor in Los Altos Hills a little more than a year after the death of his wife Constance Schneider Meritt. He was born February 29, 1904, and grew up in Durham, North Carolina, and Vernon, New York. He took degrees at Hamilton College (B.A.) and Princeton (M.A., Ph.D. in Indo-European philology), after which he pursued advanced study and scholarly research in Germany for two years. In 1936 he joined the Stanford English Department and was Professor of English Philology from 1947 until his retirement in 1969.

Herbert Meritt was one of the few most distinguished Germanic philologists of the twentieth century and was the world authority on the explication of Old English glosses. His first major work, however, was in the field of syntax (The Construction *apo koinou* in the Germanic Languages, published in Stanford University Publications, 1938), and it remains the standard treatment of the subject. Bruce Mitchell of Oxford University, the leading authority on Old English syntax, recently remarked, "Herbert Meritt's book on *apo koinou* has colored my thinking and feeling on Old English literature for more than twenty-five years." Meritt also published distinguished studies in the fields of textual criticism and the language of the Elizabethan period, but the explication of Old English glosses is the field which he made his own, and it was this work which largely earned him the extraordinary respect which he enjoyed in scholarly circles in Europe and North America. It is, in large part, to his skill in explaining such glosses that we owe his remarkable revision of, and supplement to, Clark Hall's A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (Cambridge, 1960), which, together with his Fact and Lore About Old English Words (Stanford University Publications, 1954) and Some of the Hardest Glosses in Old English (Stanford, 1968), constitutes his major contribution to English philology. In part his success resulted from his uncanny feeling for the ways in which Anglo-Saxons thought and worked as they made their intricate vernacular explications of the Latin texts they were studying. But the real secret was his deep learning in Classical and Germanic languages, along with his exceptional powers of reasoning. For a lifetime he devoted his gifts to restoring the uncorrupted meanings of words written by people a thousand years ago, and Yvor Winters saluted Meritt's work in his commendatory poem "To Herbert Dean Meritt, Professor of English Philology at Stanford University," which concludes with the sentence,

With cool persistent tact
You form what men would say.

Herbert Meritt practiced scholarship with deep seriousness; but he possessed a natural sense of humor that allowed him to wear his learning lightly. When he told the story of a professor who sat one afternoon in a pasture trying to determine whether cows uttered 'moo' or 'loom', he was seeing himself as he knew others must have seen him in his speculations on the meaning of Old English words. Such speculations both fascinated and mystified many of his students, who called his undergraduate course in the English language "Meritt's Mystery Hour."

But they loved him for his humor and respected him for his lore; and they knew that he would demand of them the same standards of honesty and precision that he had set for himself. Among his colleagues, particularly at brown-bag lunches on weekdays, his conversation was filled with droll stories, at once witty and pointed. The present world never ceased to interest him. In his observations on the foibles of human nature, he was akin to his favorite English author, Geoffrey Chaucer. Little escaped the eyes of either man.

His life was full of joy, for he delighted in "things as they are." He loved conversation, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, his favorite poems, the California Gold Country, good bourbon, conservative politics, music from the 1920's, and, above all, Constance Meritt and their sons James and Herbert, of whom he was extremely proud. Those who knew him will miss him deeply; and when they read his books, they will find that his charm and lightness of touch live on in even the most abstruse explications. When, for example, he concludes a demonstration that the hitherto puzzling Old English taeg taeg glossing Latin puppup is in fact a derisive exclamation, he closed with the reflection, "Taeg taeg may be an interjection very much like the deathless one in the Miller's Tale: "Tehee, quod she, and clapte the wyndow to!"

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