

# ALBERT STANBURROUGH COOK, CLASS OF 1872

BY JOHN T. SHAWCROSS

Professor of English, Douglass College, Rutgers University

**F**EW can claim honored position among the Sons of Rutgers more justifiably than Albert Stanburrough Cook. Outstanding undergraduate, member of the faculty, frequent recipient of graduate degrees (earned and honorary), Cook's association began in 1868 at age fifteen and continued in one way or another until his death in 1927. Here was a professor with all the rights and privileges thereunto appertaining by dint of broad knowledge, great energy, and intense concern for the state of education. This tall, bearded man, thin of face, perhaps even looked to some like the "typical" professor.

Aside from the great residue of knowledge and thought which we have in print, A. S. Cook's contributions to education remain with all college students in that type of class meeting which he called a "seminary." The small group of students discussing perhaps Aelfric's humor with an instructor who prods with genial but incisive questions owes much to his forward-looking attempts to improve learning. At Yale University such classes were preparing young men (and ladies too—much to the old grads' chagrin) to carry on the traditions that were building from 1889 through 1927.

For Albert Stanburrough Cook was something of a myth in his own time—well known for his small classes of Ph.D. aspirants in Old English or Middle English or Poetics, an innovation as he conducted them. It is no wonder that this giant of American scholarship became a kind of myth: he arrived at importance early in life, pursued supposedly opposed disciplines, maintained a balance in his careers of teaching, writing, and administration, and was ardent in his concern for improvements in education.

Born into an English family whose American genealogy began with the migration of Ellis Cooke from the environs of London in 1644, A. S. Cook was the son of a Montville, New Jersey, farmer and grandson of a local jurist and justice of the peace. By the age

of sixteen—his birth date was March 6, 1853—he was teaching mathematics, soon after turning down an offer of a professorship in chemistry at the college of Fukui, Japan, and by nineteen receiving the degree of Bachelor of Science from Rutgers College. But A. S. Cook did nothing in a small way: not only was he graduated at the head of his class academically, he gave the class oration (in German, of course) on “Culture,” and received the thesis prize for his study of “The Inclined Planes of the Morris Canal.” His mathematic and scientific interests were to be uppermost for a few more years while he remained at Rutgers as a tutor in mathematics in 1872-1873, and while he graced the Freehold Institute in Freehold, New Jersey, from 1873 to 1877, during which time (1875) he earned a Master of Science degree at his alma mater. These were only the first two of his many degrees.

In the meantime it seems that other worlds were catching his attention: languages like Latin, Greek, and Italian; linguistical studies involving phonology, morphology, and older forms of English; and literature and poetic theory. The scholastic lures of Göttingen and Leipzig held him in 1877-1878, those of London and Jena in 1881-1882. His work on manuscripts in the British Museum and on phonetics with the renowned Henry Sweet was to lead first to a Ph.D. from Jena in 1882 and to his most celebrated writing achievements through his long life.

Yet before he seriously pursued dusty Cynewulf or the Old Northumbrian Gospels in the high-backed, and terribly uncomfortable, BM chairs, he returned to the United States, to Baltimore, to organize the Department of English at Johns Hopkins. In his term of office—as “associate,” not by any means a professional rank—he whipped together a department which was to become and remain a center of important historically-oriented literary study, a center worthy of such a follower as Edwin Greenlaw. With a fine doctor’s degree to his credit, and an honorary Master of Arts from Rutgers in the same year, he proceeded to the University of California (as professor, however) to organize that Department of English—most thoroughly. The department has changed, but the seven years in which A. S. Cook spread his influence in the state were not lost. He was instrumental in bringing the University of California and the public schools of that state into cooperative rela-

tions; it was he who was responsible for raising English requirements for admission to the university and thereby making incumbent the upgrading of high-school instruction in English; and his were among the first demonstrations to high school teachers of sound procedures (or "methods" as we are now taught in Education courses) of inculcating facts and thought and thinking in the minds of the young.

His work and his growing myth brought him two more honorary degrees in 1889 when he left California and joined what was to become "home-base" for the rest of his life, Yale. Yale conferred another Master of Arts upon him, and Rutgers bestowed the well-deserved title of Doctor of Humanities. Many books, many officer-ships, many students later he was to be retired professor emeritus in 1921.

A. S. Cook probably would have written in any case, but his productivity—his staggering productivity—moved forward rapidly in his new environment and with his newly-devised seminaries. A bibliography prepared in 1923 lists over three hundred books and articles. There are the Old English works: *A First Book in Old English* (1894), *The Old English Elene, Phoenix, and Physiologus* (1919), *The Possible Begetter of the Old English Beowulf and Widsith* (1922), *The Old English Andreas and Bishop Acca of Hexham* (1924), *Cynewulf's Part In Our Beowulf* (1925), *Beowulfian and Odyssean Voyages* (1926), *Sources of the Biography of Aldhelm* (1927). There are the Middle English works: *Literary Middle English Reader* (1915)—how many doctoral candidates learned the six major dialects from this text! There are edited texts: *Judith, an Old English Epic Fragment*, Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*, Cardinal Newman's *Poetry, With Reference to Aristotle's Poetics*, *The Art of Poetry, Containing the Poetical Treatises of Horace, Vida and Boileau, with the translations of Howes, Pitt and Soame* (a text that was used extensively to fashion a generation's literary tastes), Leigh Hunt's *What Is Poetry?*, Edmund Burke's *Speech on Conciliation with America*, Tennyson's *The Princess*. There are materials concerned with the Bible: *The Authorized Version of the Bible and Its Influence*, *A Glossary of the Old Northumbrian Gospels*, *Biblical Quotations in Old English Prose Writers*, *The Bible and English Prose*

*Style*. Look at the range of interest, of periods and authors, and of approaches. There seem to be so few scholars nowadays who move out of narrowed fields of specialization, and perhaps that is why so few giants of scholarship now actively engaged come to mind. Cook represents a former world though many of that world's contexts persist—anachronistically?—in today's graduate-school ordeals. I should think that Cook, were he alive today, would be one of the first to reconsider educational procedures and aims. Not that he would throw over the past for change; improvement rather than tradition or change was his goal.

His interests in teaching never flagged and did not lag behind in publication as *The Higher Study of English* (1906) and *The Aims in the Teaching of English Literature* (1925) attest. They still hold worth for the college instructor of English—particularly those who would rush into upper-level courses, though experience be lacking. Primarily an Old English scholar, nevertheless Cook roved into later literature over and over, and one of his most significant ventures—and not only for me as one particularly concerned—was the fruit of his study of Milton. He edited Addison's *Criticisms on Paradise Lost*, which originally appeared in *The Spectator*, and *Paradise Lost, Books I and II*, and published a few articles, most of them linguistic explications. But the annotations on Milton's "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity," appearing in the *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, XV (1909), 307-368, remain the best single piece of annotation of any poem of Milton's and a model of what can be done. I lament only the relative inaccessibility of the work to current students: it really should be reproduced by one of our popular photographic processes and made generally available to all. The work, the poem, and the author deserve it. Of course, this "study" of the Ode also shows Cook's limitation: he was not a critic who analyzed meaning or applied approaches or came up with new interpretations. He probably never saw the apocalypticism of the poem. Rather he was a scholar with a great language sense, an ear for style and sound, and an amazing gift of precision of detail. He was one who laid the foundation for others to arrive at new interpretations, through sources and language development and the whole archetypal approach to literature—

though I doubt that Professor Cook would ever have come up with the mythic tie-in of his disparate materials.

His professional life included the secretaryship for the National Conference on Entrance Examinations in English in 1897-1899, the co-editorship of the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* from 1897 to 1905, the presidency of the Modern Language Association in 1897, the editorship of the *Yale Studies in English* from 1898 until his death (seventy volumes in all), and membership in the Medieval Academy, Phi Beta Kappa, and the Netherlandisch Society. His varied interests reflect themselves even here. In addition he founded the annual prizes in poetry given at Yale (in 1897) and at the University of California (in 1909). Two further honorary degrees round out recognition in his lifetime: a Doctor of Laws from Rutgers in 1906 (bringing to a total of five the degrees conferred by his real academic affiliate) and a Doctor of Letters from Princeton in 1918.

A. S. Cook's private life revolved about his first wife, the former Emily Chamberlain of Berkeley, California, whom he married on June 1, 1886, and their two children, and his second wife, the former Elizabeth Merrill, whom he married on June 7, 1911. His father's vocation became his avocation at his summer home in Vermont, and his scientific training never quite left. He gained a local reputation for his application of scientific methods to grow hay. This humanist and fine example of Renaissance man died in New Haven on September 1, 1927. Yet the myth surrounding his academic prowess continues—not so shinningly to more recent generations, but stellarly to literary scholars, or rather students. Perhaps we can paraphrase Milton's words on Sir James Ley: Though later born then to have known the daies wherein Albert Stanburrough Cook flourisht, yet by his works and his influence remaining methinks we see him living yet. I for one hope we do truly see him living yet.