

## *Obituaries*

### JAMES BLAINE HEDGES

James Blaine Hedges, who was born in Bowling Green, Missouri, on November 10, 1891, died in Providence, Rhode Island, on October 13, 1965, after a short illness. A graduate student at Harvard under Frederick Jackson Turner and one of the last of Turner's disciples, Jim Hedges spent an enormously useful lifetime in the teaching and writing of American history, with particular emphasis on the American West. He was as well a man among men, and no student or colleague or friend who came in contact with him, in or out of classroom, office, or home, ever forgot him.

After receiving A.B. and A.M. degrees in 1915 and 1916 from the University of Missouri, Jim Hedges came East for graduate study under Turner, receiving his Harvard Ph.D. in 1924. He began teaching before receiving his doctorate, holding a post at the University of Oklahoma in 1920-1921, another at Mills College in 1921-1922. Four years after arriving at Clark University in 1924 he was a full professor. After a year at Harvard as visiting lecturer in history in 1929-1930, he left Clark in 1931 to go to Brown University as George L. Littlefield professor of American history. There he stayed for the rest of his career, heading the history department from 1938 to 1952 and again from 1958 to 1960.

At Clark Jim Hedges handled nearly all of the American history courses, including his famous History of Westward Expansion. His classes were small—Clark had a total

student body of about 300 in his time—which was exactly the way he wanted it. He never liked lecturing to throngs, preferring the give-and-take of small groups. His students remember his lectures as brilliant and above all provocative. He liked nothing better than to have his interpretations challenged and would deliberately goad his students into taking issue with him. More than one young hopeful remembers to this day the humbling experience of trying to match wits with him. But out of these encounters came a greater awareness of what he was trying to do. He opened the eyes of countless young scholars to the meaningfulness of America's past in a way they have never forgotten. When he left Clark to go to Brown there was general sadness but an awareness that this had to be. Thirty years later he confessed to one of his aging students that his happiest days in teaching were spent at Clark.

At Brown Jim Hedges regularly taught courses in American history and American economic history. Generations of students crowded these courses, despite their toughness. For Jim Hedges was as superb with large classes as with small. He never used a note and never forgot a fact. He always succeeded in getting students to disagree with his interpretations, and to see him, standing alone on the dais in front of the blackboard, taking on an entire class which he had aroused and angered to the point of rebuttal, was to see him in his element. But he was never unfair and never took advantage of his position. He dealt with each student as if that youngster were his only student.

As chairman, he treated his faculty with the same exquisite courtesy and the same unspoken assumption of dealing with equals. Any member of the history department wanting to try out his ideas by giving a new course knew that Jim Hedges would see to it that the course was offered. To his staff, he was always available when needed; but he

never bothered them, except for an occasional department meeting, held only when necessity and not the calendar or the administration required it.

Where the Brown administration was concerned, Jim Hedges often came into contact and conflict with Henry M. Wriston, president of Brown during his first tenure as history chairman. Both were men of strong opinions who could on occasion express themselves bluntly, often to each other. If the chairman of history felt that the president of the university were in error—whether for his political opinions or for his administration of the school—he was never reluctant to say so. If a campus janitor left locked the door to Jim Hedges' classroom, the teacher left the morning air blue with his opinions of such incompetence. Back in his office, he would fire off a letter across the campus sharing with the man in charge his opinions on the conduct of the university in one of its smaller details.

Loyal to his staff, Jim Hedges took quiet pride in their accomplishments. After World War II, when the university expanded, he lured bright young men to Brown and gave them every opportunity—by means of modest course loads and much encouragement—to produce. Under such ideal conditions, they did produce, and no one was prouder of them than Jim Hedges. When they were lured to other posts, he was still proud of his men. One of them was the mediaevalist, Barnaby C. Keeney, whom Jim Hedges had hired in 1946 and who in 1955 succeeded Henry M. Wriston as president of Brown. Of his replacement, Henry Wriston was quoted as saying that he didn't find Barney Keeney; Jim Hedges shoved him down his throat. Jim Hedges was never one to overlook a good man.

As loyal to the cause of history as to the men under him, Jim Hedges served her well. Resorting to print only when he had something to say, he never used the same materials

more than once. In addition to a number of articles, he was the author of *Henry Villard and the Railways of the Northwest* (1930); *The Federal Railway Land Subsidy Policy of Canada* (1934); *Building the Canadian West* (1939); *Westward Expansion* (1949), with Ray A. Billington; and *The Browns of Providence Plantations: Colonial Years* (1952). He also wrote the American history section of the *Encyclopedia of World History* (1940), and from 1950 to 1955 was a member of the board of editors of the *American Historical Review*, a professional stint to which he contributed ungrudgingly and which he seemed to enjoy hugely. In addition, he served the American Historical Association on its public archives commission and as chairman of its Justin Winsor prize committee.

He was elected to the American Antiquarian Society in October, 1938, and contributed an article on "The Brown Papers: The Record of a Rhode Island Business Family" to the April, 1941, issue of its *Proceedings*. He was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Canadian Political Science Association, Economic History Association, Massachusetts Historical Society, and Mississippi Valley Historical Association. In Providence he belonged to the British Empire Club and the Providence Art Club and was a trustee of the Sevellon Brown Foundation.

When he retired from teaching at Brown in 1962, Jim Hedges was quoted as saying, "It really has been exciting from my point of view. I think it has been for others." His thousands of students at Clark, Brown, and elsewhere would agree that it had been exciting for them, too. In 1964 Brown conferred on him an honorary doctorate of humane letters. President Keeney, appropriately enough, made the presentation, whose citation read: "Good and bad students alike (few could remain indifferent) remember with affection

and respect your exhaustive knowledge, your penetrating analysis, and the promise of more for those who seek it. As Chairman of your Department, you brought here young men who promised and often achieved distinction. None of them will ever forget your kindly guidance, and most will come to think of the years with you as their happiest. Whether your books describe the opening of the West or the opening of the world to Rhode Island entrepreneurs, they are of first importance."

At the time of his death he had virtually completed the manuscript of the second volume of his history of the Brown family. He had ended the preface to his first volume of that study with a characteristically forthright tribute to his wife, "to whose completely honest criticism this volume owes much of whatever merit it may possess." His wife was Nina Leonard Hedges, of Rock Valley, Iowa, whom he married on August 10, 1921. She survives him, as does their son, William L. Hedges, professor of American literature at Goucher College.

Completeness, honesty, and criticism also sum up Jim Hedges' own career in American higher education. Though he would have scoffed at such a description, he exemplified it. Complete, honest, and critical he was—complete because anything less was half-baked, honest because anything less was a lie, and critical because truth and its practitioners needed it and could survive the abrasion. His great legacy to them in their knowledge of these virtues comforts his legions of students and hosts of admiring colleagues and friends. But they also know that the death of James Blaine Hedges leave a gap that may not be filled in this generation in the ranks of American higher education in general and in the historical profession in the United States in particular.

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