JOHN DYNELEY PRINCE

THE death of John Dyneley Prince, Professor Emeritus of East European Languages of Columbia University, on October 11, 1945, after a long illness brought to a close a career that was unusual and distinguished in many fields. He was not only an outstanding scholar in Slavonic and Semitic, and the founder of Slavonic studies at Columbia University, but he had a long record of public service under the State of New Jersey and the United States Government. He was an accomplished musician and composer, and he was also one of the most versatile linguists in the world. All this made him an almost legendary figure even during his own lifetime and among his associates, and has caused his loss to be felt even more keenly by all with whom he came into contact.

John Dyneley Prince was born in New York City April 17, 1868. He received his degree of Bachelor of Arts at Columbia in 1888 and then became Columbia representative on the University of Pennsylvania expedition to Babylonia. He studied at the University of Berlin 1889–1890 and then at Johns Hopkins University, where he received the Doctorate of Philosophy in 1892. He then became Professor of Semitic Languages at New York University and Dean of its Graduate School. In 1902, he was appointed Professor of Semitic Languages at Columbia University, and at the outbreak of the First World War commenced instruction in Russian. He was named Professor of Slavonic Languages in 1915 and the title was changed to Professor of East European Languages in 1933. He retired as Professor Emeritus in 1937.

Along with this he entered political life in New Jersey and was elected Member of the New Jersey Assembly in 1906 and became Speaker in 1909. In 1910 he was elected to the New Jersey Senate, was made Leader in 1911, and President of the Senate in 1912 and was for a while in that year Acting Governor of the State. From 1917 to 1921, he was President of the New Jersey Civil Service Commission. In 1921, President Harding appointed him American Minister to Denmark and in 1926 President Coolidge transferred him to Yugoslavia, where he remained until he returned to Columbia in 1933. He received the Order of St. Sava, II class, from Serbia, in 1912, the Order of Polonia Restituta, II class, in 1924, the Grand Cross of the Dannebrog in 1933, and in the same year the Grand Cordon of the Yugoslav Crown. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society, a Life Trustee of the American Scandinavian Foundation, a Life Member of the New York Historical Society and of the American Oriental Society, and a Life Fellow of the New York Academy of Sciences.

This is the dry outline of a career which was dominated throughout by his studies in language and by his remarkable talent for speaking various foreign languages and dialects. He relied on this ability in his political and diplomatic work and it colored and influenced all of his scientific

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work, yes, and even his friendships, which ranged from the crowned heads of Europe to the Lama of the Kalmuk colony in Belgrade. In the years when he was active in politics, it was not at all unusual for him to deliver political addresses in five or six languages in the course of a single evening and he almost invariably sang one or more of the folksongs of the people to whom he was speaking.

All this was no program arranged for show. As a boy, he had studied the language of the Eastern Algonquin Indians and years later he was remembered by Adirondack Indians as a man who could talk their language better than their fathers could. In Belgrade, he was mistaken for a Turk. Add to this the fact that he could consciously speak in Serb, Croat, or Slovene, in various dialects of Danish, Italian, German, French, Hungarian, etc., not to mention various forms of Gypsy, and even the most cynical person was impressed by his incredible ability. He had a truly uncanny ability for listening to any person speaking in any language and answering in exactly the same dialect and with the same enunciation.

In the Slavonic field he had first learned Slovak; then he passed to Russian, and then to Yugoslav; but in intervening periods, he had mastered all the other languages. It was small wonder that, when the question was raised of introducing Slavonic into Columbia, he was the obvious person to be placed in charge, and the results justified his appointment.

The very breadth of his interest in the Slavonic languages led him to oppose resolutely any attempt to confine the new Department to Russian, as was desired by many people who felt that there could never be any real need for University work in the other languages or who sympathized with the dream that all the Slavonic rivers would merge in the Russian sea. Almost immediately he insisted upon the addition of courses in Polish and Czech. He started a School of Spoken Languages in University Extension and if it did not continue, it was because of his appointment as Minister to Denmark and on his return he resumed his interest in the other languages of Eastern Europe and reorganized them in the Department of East European Languages.

In view of the present discussion of methods of learning languages and his own masterful skill, it may be interesting to note that he was equally opposed to those schools of thought which stressed a reading knowledge without speaking and a speaking knowledge without reading. It was his invariable practice to study thoroughly the grammar of any language which he desired to master. He was never weary of studying grammars, grammatical texts, and dictionaries; he read them and annotated them, and it was not until he was sure in his own mind that he knew the general outline of a language that he secured a native to talk to him and correct his pronunciation and idiomatic expressions. With his increasing knowledge, he was able to shorten the time that he required, but he never neglected the preliminary steps and never tried to build his knowledge on an

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insecure foundation. The persons who met him casually had no more idea of the work that he had expended on developing his linguistic talent than they have of the hours of practice that are necessary to produce a finished pianist or violinist. They saw only the results and not the labor that he devoted to it, often in periods of a few minutes between important engagements, when the average person would regard them as too short for any practical study.

It was language, rather than literature, that fascinated him, and hence came his preparation of grammars in Assyrian, in Russian, in Latvian, and Serbo-Croatian. Hence came, too, his many articles and studies on the relations between languages, often of unrelated groups, which were brought into close contact with one another, his interest in the Tatar elements in old Russian, the borrowing of Slavonic words by Hungarian, the relations between Assyrian and Sumerian, but there is no need to list his works. In 1939, Columbia University published a selection of his writings together with a complete bibliography in a volume entitled *Fragment from Babel*. It gives a good idea of the wide range of interest which he had and of the way in which he used all of his opportunities for advancing knowledge.

It cannot show his remarkable knowledge of folksongs and of music. Again and again he would sit down at the piano and present a program ranging from several versions of the Mohammedan call to prayer and Indian songs to the better known folksongs of the European nations. He was asked several times to sing before the Duke of Connaught when he was Governor General of Canada. He sang at Columbia, at Copenhagen, and at Belgrade. He composed a march for the Royal Guard in Yugoslavia and even a version of the music for "Mandalay."

It is only unfortunate that he never prepared a general volume on his theories of language and that he never wrote out his memoirs, which would have covered his wide acquaintance with the leading men in the First World War and the period that followed. Yet he could hardly be expected to do it, for he was constantly looking forward, and felt that it was not worth while to stop with his present knowledge and seem to put a finish to his work.

At the University he was interested in everything that would expand and strengthen the Department which was so close to his heart. He was always ready to adapt it to the needs of the present, eager to find new opportunities by lectures, by concerts, by new courses to make Eastern Europe better known to the University audience and to all that could be brought in.

Besides that as a man, he attracted and held the warm affection of all who studied under him. He was always generous in his judgments and he was never willing to use the researches of others without acknowledgment. More than that, he was always chary of writing articles with younger students, for fear that they would not receive due credit for their own share in the work which was done jointly. He much preferred to

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give away of his abundant ideas rather than seem to take an unfair advantage.

With his wide acquaintance and his broad interests, he laid down general policies for the organization of a Department for the study of the languages and cultures of Eastern Europe that can be expanded but will never need correction. He was an able organizer and administrator, a true scholar, and a sincere friend. He has left a legend behind him wherever he moved, and an undying memory among all of those people, colleagues and students, who knew him during those years when his unlimited energy and encyclopedic knowledge were leading him on from one achievement to another, from one post of honor to another, from one field of service to another. He was a great scholar and a great man. Requiescat in pace.

CLARENCE A. MANNING.

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