Central European History 40 (2007), 133–137.
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DOI: 10.1017/S0008938907000313 Printed in the USA

MEMORIAL

Gordon Alexander Craig (1913–2005)

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In the spring of 1936, Gordon A. Craig, twenty-two years old and about to graduate from Princeton, made two of his earliest public appearances. The first was a poem, modeled on a Latin Ode, published in the *Nassau Lit* with the title "Marxicos Odi," and dedicated "To My Proletarian Sweetheart." The poem evokes the brevity of life, the swift passing of undergraduate pleasures, and their irresistible distraction from more serious things:

> Granted we are a feckless crew;
> But can you lift your voice to scold
> If social questions leave us cold
> When spring comes barging in anew?

A few weeks later, a somewhat different Gordon Craig delivered the Valedictory Address to the class of 1936. A sense of political crisis loomed large in these remarks, of problems too long neglected and perils soon to come. The young valedictorian saw much more clearly than most Americans that "in the next few years, as a world power, [America] may have to make grave decisions as to her attitude toward belligerent nations in other parts of the world." Evoking a speech by Woodrow Wilson delivered forty years before, Craig urged his classmates to devote themselves to the nation's pressing business, not in order to further change for the sake of change, but to foster growth and progress, "for intellectual growth is conservative of life, and progress is life itself."

In his valedictory remarks Craig pointed to events in Germany as an example of what liberalism's failure can produce. The preceding summer he had observed the German situation first hand when he spent two months studying and traveling there with a group of Princeton undergraduates. His journal from this trip provides a remarkably clear-headed and insightful picture of the Nazi regime, then two years in power, its hold on political institutions and popular loyalties virtually unchallenged, but its future development still obscure. Especially striking are his reports of a series of conversations about the "Jewish question"—often with people who claimed to wish the Jews no

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938907000313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

harm, but who were trying to understate or explain away the rising tide of persecution against them. Here we see examples of that toxic blend of delusion and deceit that would help to pave the road to catastrophe that lay ahead.

These experiences in the summer of 1935 began—and in some ways permanently marked—Craig's extraordinarily productive personal and intellectual engagement with Germans and Germany. But his time in Germany had a more direct and immediate result for Craig's future: a chance meeting with a Rhodes scholar, who sang the praises of Oxford, led him to apply for a scholarship, which, much to his surprise, he won. He arrived at Balliol College in the fall of 1936 to spend two of the most important years of his life. In Oxford, Craig studied with B. H. Sumner and E. L.Woodward, two of Britain's finest historians, deepened his knowledge and experience of Europe, and watched from a ringside seat the preliminary bouts for the major European war that everyone expected.

"Craig is a small, white-haired American," wrote Dan Davin about the young scholar from New Jersey, "with a good brain, sensibility, a rich deep voice and deeper humor." Together with Davin, Walt Rostow, Philip Kaiser, and many others, Craig became a well-known figure on the Oxford scene, much sought after in Junior Common Rooms for his songs and no stranger to Oxford's many pubs. It was also during his time at Oxford that Craig met Phyllis Halcomb, a young American then staying with her English aunt. They would soon become engaged, marry, and be together for the next sixty-six years. Despite a strenuous social life—many long-night conversations on literature and life with his friends, lots of music, and various excursions to London and Paris, all washed down with not inconsiderable quantities of drink—Craig worked extremely hard at Oxford, producing a thesis for his B.Litt. on British policy in the Luxemburg crisis of 1867. Some of his drinking companions found this subject rather hilarious, but the thesis is, in fact, a fine piece of work, still a journeyman's work, but one in which the master's talents as a historian and as a stylist are already apparent.

After two years at Oxford, Craig returned to Princeton, where he worked with Raymond James Sontag, a legendary teacher and scholar who had just published a masterful study of *Germany and England*, in which he sought to define the cultural basis of their fateful antagonism. Although he had been trained as a medievalist, Sontag made his reputation as a diplomatic historian—his survey of European diplomacy, first published in 1933, is still very much worth reading. He was also a fine stylist with broad literary and cultural interests—it was Sontag, for instance, who recommended the book that began Craig's long fascination with Theodor Fontane.

Craig's dissertation, written under Sontag's direction and finished in the spring of 1941, was entitled "Britain and Europe, 1866-69: A Study in the Application of Non-Intervention." It included a chapter on the Luxemburg

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crisis, but set the events from his Oxford thesis in the broader context of the British response to the diplomatic revolution that began with Prussia's victory over Austria in 1866 and ended with the defeat of France in 1870. Although Craig wrote this analysis of Britain's ambivalent relationship to European affairs during the most critical stage of the Second World War, he carefully avoided any cheaply bought connections to current events. This scholarly restraint made the connection between his story and its contemporary setting all the more compelling.

After teaching at Yale for a year, Craig returned to Princeton in 1941 to take the position left vacant by Sontag's departure for the University of California at Berkeley. A few months later he was drawn into the war, first with the OSS, then the Marine Corps. Returning to Princeton after service in the Pacific, his rise through the academic ranks was rapid: in response to an offer from Cornell in the spring of 1946, he was promoted to Associate Professor; other offers and promotion to full professor followed. In 1961, Craig—much to the surprise of his colleagues—moved from Princeton to Stanford. From 1969 until his retirement in 1985, he was the J. E. Wallace Sterling Professor in the Humanities.

At both Princeton and Stanford, Craig was extraordinarily successful in the classroom. Beautifully written and flawlessly delivered, his lectures introduced generations of students to the drama of European history. He had a distinguished group of doctoral students, many of whom went on to be leaders of the profession: at the time of his death, the president and executive secretary of the German Studies Association, and the editor of the *German Studies Review* all received their doctoral degrees under his direction.

It is not surprising that Craig began as a diplomatic historian and continued to invest much of his time and energy in the study of international relations. Not only his own teacher, but also the most talented members of Sontag's generation had devoted themselves to examining the diplomatic origins of the First World War and thus of America's own entrance into European affairs. Sidney Fay (whose revisionist work on the origins of the war was one of the first important American contributions to modern European history), William Langer, Bernadotte Schmitt, and many others made diplomacy, seen in a European context, their major concern. During the first ten years of its existence, from 1929 to 1939, *The Journal of Modern History* published thirty-seven articles on modern Europe, of which twenty-three were about some aspect of diplomacy.

Like his teachers, Craig tried to understand the structure of nineteenth-century politics—best illustrated perhaps by his brilliant contribution to the *New Cambridge Modern History*. But he also brought to the subject a new set of concerns. He became, for instance, a master of the biographical approach to diplomacy, which he used as the coeditor of, and contributor to, *The Diplomats*, a classic collection of biographies of statesmen and ambassadors between the wars, and in his marvelous synthesis of German foreign policy from Bismarck

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to Adenauer, which began as a series of lectures at Johns Hopkins. Craig also developed an interest in the military dimensions of international relations, which led him to his first major work, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, published in 1955. In this book, Craig moved confidently across two hundred years of German history, tracing the evolution of the Prussian army from its origins as an instrument of seventeenth-century absolutism to its final degradation and defeat in the Second World War.

Craig's intellectual temperament was shaped by Anglo-American liberalism, perhaps most of all by the great figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. His literary style was nourished by his deep reading of British literature: William Hazlitt, whom he especially admired, but also Dickins, P. G. Wodehouse, and many others. Very early in his career, Craig developed a characteristic mode of expression, apparent in both his writing and his public presentations: clear, graceful, beautifully balanced sentences, a wide range of literary allusions, an eye for the right quotation, and telling detail—all aimed at communicating with both his fellow scholars and the lay audience, "from which," he once said, "we ultimately derive our legitimacy."

Craig had many interests and wrote on many subjects, but he returned again and again to the German question, that is, the question of how a culture and society so rich in promise and accomplishment could have produced one of history's most murderously destructive regimes. In the last, extraordinarily productive decades of his life, he wrestled with different aspects of this question: in *The History of Germany, 1866–1945*, his magisterial contribution to the Oxford History of Modern Europe Series; in his brilliantly evocative book *The Germans*; and in scores of articles and essays, especially for the *New York Review of Books*. His last book, a study of the great German novelist Theodor Fontane, was a labor of love: beautifully written and elegantly constructed, it was infused with the author's deep sympathy for his subject. All of the work from this stage of his career was translated and published by Beck Verlag, whose editors became his close friends and admirers. These translations were not only a great critical and commercial success, but they also made him something of a celebrity in Germany, where he was the subject of television programs and magazine articles.

From his selection as valedictorian in 1936 until his death, Craig's accomplishments were recognized by numerous awards and prizes. He was a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, a fellow of the British Academy, an Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, and a member of the Orden Pour le Mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste. He served as president of the American Historical Association, president of the Conference Group for Central European History, and vice president of the Comité International des Sciences Historiques. He was awarded the Commander's Cross of the Legion of Merit by the Federal Republic of Germany, the Goethe Medaille by the Goethe Gesellschaft, and the Benjamin

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Franklin-Wilhelm von Humboldt Prize by the German-American Academic Council.

For more than sixty years, Craig kept a diary, which is now available in the Stanford Library; plans to publish portions of it are currently underway. Although the diary is not complete—some of the years are summarized in the form of a memoir based on pocket diaries and recollections—it nonetheless provides a vivid portrait of Craig's active, energetic career. Family and friends play a big role, but there is also a lot about teaching, new books read and old ones rediscovered, research projects, lectures, university affairs, and government service. Reading this diary and reflecting on his long and productive life, one is reminded of what Wilhelm Dilthey, the great German philosopher and historian of ideas, once described as "the foundation of historical vision." This vision comes, Dilthey wrote, "from the power and breadth of our own lives and the energy with which we reflect upon them. It is this vision alone that enables us to give life back to the bloodless shadows of the past."

Gordon Craig remained intellectually active until the final months of his life, when first his eyesight, then his heart failed. But even after his world had shrunk to a hospital room and blindness had separated him from the written words he loved so much, he somehow remained himself, capable of becoming—at least for a few minutes—that deep-voiced, deeply humorous American whom Dan Davin had first encountered in Balliol's inner quad seventy years before.

Gordon Craig died on October 30, 2005, in Portola Valley, California. He was survived by his wife of sixty-six years, Phyllis Halcomb Craig (who died in May 2006); by his daughters, the Reverend Susan Craig, Dr. Deborah Preston, and Professor Martha Craig; his son, Charles Craig; eight grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

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