IN MEMORIAM

Gordon Wright (1912-2000)

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The new millennium brought the loss of the most eminent American historian of modern France. Gordon Wright, emeritus professor of history at Stanford University, died on the 11th of January in his California home.

Gordon Wright was a member of a generation that matured during the war who managed to combine academic life with public service. Born in Washington State into a family of farmers, teachers and preachers, he attended Whitman College. His first encounter with France came in 1937 as an American Field Service fellow. Although he originally wanted a career in the diplomatic corps, he took his Ph.D. in history at Stanford in 1939, published his thesis on the presidency of Raymond Poincaré,¹ and began his academic life at the University of Oregon. The war interrupted the peace of academia. While serving as a liaison with the State Department in 1944 he was assigned the job of leading a convoy of vehicles and personnel from Lisbon to Paris to help set up the embassy. The fighting was far from over and the official who gave Wright the assignment later told him "he had not expected them to make it." His book on the making of the constitution of the Fourth Republic (*The Reshaping of French Democracy*)² was written while he was an adviser on political affairs at the U.S. embassy from 1945 to 1947. After his tour in Paris he returned to the University of Oregon where he taught until he moved to Stanford in 1957. Three years later he published his celebrated text, *France in Modern Times*³ that has served as the primer for several generations of American students. During the 1960s he completed his monograph, *Rural Revolution in France*,⁴ on the postwar transformation of the countryside; composed a history of the war (*The Ordeal of Total War, 1939-45*)⁵ that became the final volume in the prestigious Langer series on modern Europe; as well as editing Michelet's history of the French revolution and co-authoring a popular book of readings on contemporary Europe. His university career was interrupted by a second

period of government service, this time as cultural attaché in Paris where he witnessed the upheaval of 1968 and, to the amazement of the French, spoke out against some of Washington's policies in Vietnam. In 1975 Wright received the highest honor of the profession when he was elected president of the American Historical Association. Over his long career he served as a mentor to over a score of doctoral students and continued to write—most notably biographical essays on illustrative or notorious personages some of which appeared in his volume *Insiders and Outliers*.⁶ “Three Episodes from the German Occupation: or the Ambiguities of Treason” is an essay from this collection that captures the essence of the Wright historiographical style. *Between the Guillotine and Liberty*,⁷ which appeared in 1983, was his last monograph. His former students honored him with a *festschriften*, *The Transformation of Modern France: Essays in Honor of Gordon Wright*,⁸ in 1997.

In background and appearance Gordon Wright was a Westerner: tall, lean, self-effacing, yet affable. In demeanor he was dignified. In outlook he was optimistic despite much travail including the tragic death of a teenage son. His lectures and scholarly papers were erudite and subdued yet sparkled with his wry humor. In discussing history or politics he displayed a genius for defining issues and constructing precise arguments. Open to alternative views yet wary of dogma, he was the consummate moderate. In essence what animated and defined his intellect was empathy, kindness, integrity and a quiet wisdom.

Wright constructed his scholarship around four themes: modernization, Franco-American relations, statesmanship, and the dilemma of moral choice.

In the early 1940s he encountered a France emerging from its darkest hours. He saw at first-hand the loss of self-esteem, the legacy of suspicion, disguised guilt, left by the war, as well as the depressing effects of economic decline. As a Foreign Service officer he witnessed the hardships endured by Parisians during the terrible winter of 1945-46. Along with many other American observers, he worried about the fragility of French democracy and the rigidity of its society and economy. Wright was a prominent member of that generation of historians and social scientists who conceived of French misfortunes as a question of backwardness or, as it was dubbed at the time, the problem of France “as the sick man of Europe.” His generation naturally made implicit comparisons between a troubled France and a confident, powerful America with its stable democracy, economic prowess, and social mobility.

Wright contributed directly to understanding this problematic with his work on the structural weaknesses of French democracy under the Fourth Republic and his studies of agrarian modernization and rural protest. He toured villages, talked to farmers, and analyzed their political views. In the midst of the Cold War he explained the appeal of communism in the French countryside. When he turned to writing his text he constructed *France in Modern Times* around the issue of modernization making much, for example, of the “barbed wire entanglements,” e.g. interest groups, and the political impasse that obstructed progress during the Third and Fourth Republics. He

utilized the notion of a stalemate society, proposed by Michel Crozier and Stanley Hoffmann, to frame his account of the new France that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. For him modernization was part of a political story and sound government depended on the quality of its leadership. In his history of France, for example, Wright reflected on alternative explanations for the fall of various regimes, but concluded that in 1792 and 1830 as in 1848 the “short-coming of statesmanship seems to have been the critical factor.” His text praised the political pragmatist and the statesman of character. Thus he preferred the late Gambetta or Jaurès to an ideologue like Guesde and he thought France was fortunate to have turned up a leader like Clemenceau in 1917 but not so fortunate in finding Pétain in 1940. The diplomat manqué was a shrewd judge of those who wielded state power.

Today the issue that occupied Gordon Wright and his generation has been reformulated again as the problem of the “vanishing French.” In recent decades the French have faced the effects of modernization—the consequences of overcoming backwardness, or to sustain the simile the “sick man of Europe” has been cured but the cure has so altered the patient that he/she is unrecognizable, e.g. the empty villages and churches, the eradication of territorial borders, the suburbanization of life, the loss of supposed ethnic homogeneity, and, the Americanization of culture. These are the changes, the fruits of modernization that preoccupy contemporary students of France. We owe a large debt to the pioneering research Gordon Wright did over forty years ago that conceptualized the problems and trends of 20th-century France. His work, and that of his generation, continues to shape our research agenda.

Franco-American concerns and comparisons informed much of his scholarship, perhaps a reflection of his tours in the embassy in Paris. Surely the most amusing and insightful contribution to the cross Atlantic dialogue was his lecture, later an essay, about the evolution of Americans’ views of France—that “Sometimes A Great Nation”—in which he pointed out that unlike the French obsession with America, most Americans have not paid much attention to France.⁹ He recalled how an American journalist attending a Franco-American colloquium in the 1970s shocked the French participants by declaring bluntly “For most Americans, France is not a very ‘big deal.’” Wright also noted how different political styles contributed to misunderstandings between the two allies. He remembered the story circulating at the Paris embassy in the 1960s during De Gaulle’s quarrels with Washington. According to the story, President Johnson refusing to be riled by De Gaulle told a French diplomat: “When ol’ De Gaulle throws those beanballs at me, I just step back out of the batter’s box and let ‘em go by.” The emissary on leaving the Oval Office was heard to whisper to his interpreter, “*Qu’est-ce que c’est que le beanball?*”

Fortunately Wright recorded his reflections on the historian’s craft in his 1975 presidential address, “History as a Moral Science,”¹⁰ to the American Historical Association. With the shadow of Watergate in the background and the strident voices of radicals and conservatives in his ears he proposed a liberal

credo. He expressed concern about the possibility that liberals in their search for objectivity and their flight from moral judgment had abdicated their responsibility allowing students to go untutored and opening the way for the ideologues. Then at the peak of his career, the Stanford historian expressed concern that liberals, in an age of moral ambiguity and ideological conflict, offered no guidance. "We liberals have been re-enacting the charge of the Light Brigade: while cannon volley and thunder to the right and to the left of us, we ourselves gallop on in a cloud of dust, unsure just which way is forward, and shouting to those who follow us to study the map and draw their own conclusions." At the same time he acknowledged that New Left critics may have had a point in exposing liberals as "hidden preachers, who, behind their so-called dispassionate neutrality, acted as apologists for the status quo" (7). Recalling his evangelical ancestry Wright proposed to relegitimate the writing and teaching of history by affirming a liberal morality:

In an age of unprecedented complexity, when ideological fanaticism, sporadic bursts of tribal fury, and the advocacy of 'realism' in both its crude and its sophisticated form put world stability and even human existence at risk, the liberal temper may offer the nearest thing to a set of guideposts through the mine field. Its rejection of a black-and-white world in which the battalions of good and evil line up in serried ranks; its awareness of ambiguity as a profound and pervasive presence in human affairs; its respect for such qualities as skepticism, tolerance, fair-mindedness, and what George Orwell called ... 'decency'—these traits combine to make up a world view that in some ways overlaps those of the radical or the conservative, but that possesses its own integrity, its central core of values by which to judge the past and to relate that past to the present. (8-9)

Wright advocated a liberal history, written without preaching or distortion, as the way out. In a slightly apologetic tone he said: "What too many of us have hesitated to do, I believe, is to take the final step—to risk a conclusion, to make a judgment, to advance and defend our view of how things were, and why, and what this meant to people of the time, and what it means to people of today" (9). Abraham Lincoln, Tomas Masaryk and Jean Jaurès, in the speaker's view, were admirable leaders from a liberal perspective. Trying to balance the historian's commitment both to objectivity and to values, Wright concluded that history as a moral science meant: "our search for truth ought to be quite consciously suffused by a commitment to some deeply held humane values" (11).

Gordon Wright's message is as relevant today as it was when he made his address twenty-five years ago. The historian's craft is to combine objectivity and values. "Decency" is one such liberal ideal Wright honored and it is a value that describes him and his legacy.

Notes

1. *Raymond Poincaré and the French Presidency* (Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1942).
2. *The Reshaping of French Democracy* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1948).
3. *France in Modern Times: 1760 to the Present* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1960 [first edition]; New York: W.W. Norton, 1995 [fifth edition]).
4. *Rural Revolution in France: The French Peasantry in the Twentieth Century* (Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1964).
5. *The Ordeal of Total War, 1939-45* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
6. *Insiders and Outliers: The Individual in History* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1981).
7. *Between the Guillotine and Liberty: Two Centuries of the Crime Problem in France* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1983).
8. *The Transformation of Modern France: Essays in the Honor of Gordon Wright*, William Cohen, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
9. "Sometimes a Great Nation," *The Stanford Magazine* 8, 1 (1980).
10. "History as a Moral Science," *American Historical Review* 81, 1 (February 1976): 1-11.