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Lester G. Wells: An Appreciation

Edwin H. Cady

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

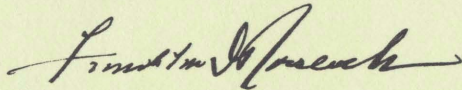
January 29, 1944.

Dear Paul:

I am glad your resignation, effective at the close of business Monday, January thirty-first, tendered in your letter of January twenty-first does not entail your retirement from the public service. I accept it, therefore, effective as of the date indicated.

You have done such good work as Under Secretary of Agriculture that I have the fullest confidence you will meet every requirement of your new responsibilities as Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget.

Very sincerely yours,



Honorable Paul H. Appleby,
Under Secretary of Agriculture,
Washington, D. C.

Letter to Paul H. Appleby from President Roosevelt on the occasion of Appleby's resignation as Under Secretary of Agriculture to accept the post of Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget. From Syracuse University Archives.

THE COURIER

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Lester G. Wells: An Appreciation

by Edwin H. Cady

A favorite book to me from its inception more than twenty years ago has been *Stephen Crane's Love Letters to Nellie Crouse: With Six Other Letters, New Materials on Crane at Syracuse University and a Number of Unusual Photographs* (1954). The almost incredibly seventeenth century title (a 24-word title for an 87-page book) bespeaks the character of that pioneering Director of the Syracuse University Press, Dr. William Miller. Yet it really is a wonderful little book. It set forth the treasures of the Syracuse University Stephen Crane Collection — amassed mainly through the generosity of George Arents and the research acuity of Lester G. Wells.

Among the brightest gems were three of the most carefully composed and self-revealing letters of a great but still rather mysterious author. There was also a set of fine photographs. There was a collection of other letters, one the funniest Crane ever wrote, and a series of fundamental Crane documents. It had all been gathered through the energy, pertinacity, and imagination of Lester Wells. And one of the things that makes me fond of the book is that the interminable title page continues: "Edited with notes and introductions by Edwin H. Cady and Lester G. Wells." Why did it read that way? Because I went to Bill Miller at the Press and swore to him that Lester was *not* to have his way. Lester's name, I demanded, must appear on the title page no matter what he said.

Lester as researcher was a fighting man, tough, resourceful, sharp. Lester as careerist was modest past the point of self-deprecation, even to the point of such timidity that he let himself be neglected, exploited, even robbed. His contributions to scholarship and his Library were positive. I am proud to have taken a little stroll toward posterity holding hands with Lester. His contributions to the future were to be substantial. *The Courier* and the Syracuse University Library Associates, with all the many things they have done and mean, appeared to me when they were founded to rest solidly on some of Lester's work.

Professor Cady came to Syracuse from The Ohio State University as an Assistant Professor of English in 1946. One of the founders of the Syracuse American Studies Program, he was also the first director of the Ph.D. in Humanities Program, a member for ten years of the Syracuse University Press Board, and a member of the Board of Editors of *Symposium*. He has published books on W. D. Howells, Stephen Crane, John Woolman, and the theory of literary realism, among other topics. Since 1959 the James H. Rudy Professor of English at Indiana University, he will assume a post as Professor of English at Duke University in the autumn of 1973.



Lester Wells tests the emergency lock on the Lena R. Arents Book Room in Carnegie Library, circa 1960. From Syracuse University Archives.

Yet it is finally as a teacher that Lester Wells now seems most important to me. He was an archivist, bibliographer, bookman. If he ever taught a class (as I suspect, for the first time on writing this, he must have), I was never aware of it. Part of his modesty was to disclaim all right to preference or recognition as a professor: he was “staff,” a hewer of wood. But who teaches most and best – the teacher with his classroom myriads? or he who teaches the teachers? Lester taught me a lot.

The odds are that it was in the autumn of 1952 that a note came to me from Lester Wells inviting me to see some interesting new holograph letters of Stephen Crane. When I came to his desk in the cluttered, converted classroom which served him as office, I saw what family precedents authorized me to think a very Upstate type, a lean, loose-jointed man, already stooped, aquiline, with soft, kindly eyes and voice belying his scowl. He handed me the volume, elegantly bound in scarlet and padded leather, which housed the legendary Crouse letters and invited me to take them home, read them, and see what I thought.

“By the way,” he said apologetically, “I have made some typed copies for you to use if you want. But of course you’ll want to see if they are correct. And I’ve added a few notes of some things I happened to know.”

As it took me some time to discover, the texts were unknown to Crane scholarship; they had been immaculately transcribed; and in no printed source could some of Wells’s notes be found. Then it transpired that in the George Arents Stephen Crane Collection at Syracuse University of which Mr. Wells was Curator, a number of very interesting other Crane items reposed. When I first met Lester Wells, I had only a text-book acquaintance with Stephen Crane. By the time Lester was done with me, I had begun to know something about Crane and we had a curious but fascinating little book.

What I learned about Stephen Crane from Lester Wells became important to me as a teacher and a scholar. But the other things he taught were bigger than that. Lester had an exaggerated faith in his ideal of the *scholars*, men of an intellectual class far above his, for whom he felt it an honor to toil. He caught sharply and bitterly the lapses of those who through fakery, cant, or laziness betrayed his ideal. His reverence for reality in scholarship reinforced in me the ideal of my own best professors.

Lester was generous with what he knew. He had so little use for fox-hole or “Keep-off-my-turf” scholarship that he would, though livid with despair, give away secrets even to selfish fakes who he knew would salt them away and still block everybody – including Lester Wells – from access to materials. Like my professor Harry Hayden Clark, Lester taught free-trade in ideas and documents.

And Lester was, above all, a University man. He was for Crane, and Special Collections, and Rare Books, and the Library. But he was for me and Bill George and Howard Brogan: he was for anybody and anything that

would build up the University. He was willing to give any resource he could muster for the cause, never minding that the cause kept him obscure and paid him sometimes in bureaucratic sneers. He drew the University men — like Toni Pace and Mary Marshall — to him and sometimes acquainted them with each other. He made Syracuse then and now a better University. Like the man in Robert Frost's poem, he "had a lover's quarrel" with his world.

Lester Grosvenor Wells was born in Cazenovia, New York, on August 26, 1894. He was a graduate of Syracuse University and, after serving as assistant export manager for Oneida Ltd. for twenty-three years, returned to Syracuse in 1943 to acquire a Library Science degree. In 1946, Mr. Wells organized the Lena R. Arents Rare Book Room and became the University's first Rare Book Librarian. He was the author of a number of books and articles, among them works on the Oneida Community and Stephen Crane.

Mr. Wells was the recipient of the 1962 Post Standard Award for outstanding service to Syracuse University Libraries. His citation read: "For your scholarly interest in history and books which has consistently for two decades raised the level of academic accomplishment of the library staff; for your discriminating and wise judgment which has guided the acquisition and use of rare books and special collections to the library; for your distinction as the first Curator of Special Collections and first Rare Book Librarian at this your Alma Mater; for the superb taste and technical knowledge you have contributed to the creation and development of the Lena R. Arents Book Room; for your authorship which has not only interpreted notable sources of the Library to the world of scholarship but also increased the prestige of Syracuse University; for your generous gifts of rare books which have expressed your deep understanding of the role of rare books in an academic community and an abiding loyalty to your Alma Mater; and for your leadership in the Dikaia Foundation of Delta Upsilon where mind and heart were merged to benefit Syracuse University and its library: the Syracuse, New York, Post Standard Award for the year 1962 is presented to Lester Grosvenor Wells, Class of 1918."

Mr. Wells died at his home in Syracuse on September 30, 1972.



Gerrit Smith. From a portrait by E.W. Goodwin. Photograph from the Gerrit Smith Collection in the George Arents Research Library.

