

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

DAVID M. POTTER (1910 - 1971)

David Morris Potter was born on December 6, 1910, in Augusta, Georgia. Graduating from Emory University in 1932, he entered Yale University for graduate study and eight years later received his Ph.D. degree in history. Meanwhile, he had begun his teaching career, which included two years at the University of Mississippi, four years at Rice Institute, and nineteen years at Yale, after which he joined the Stanford faculty in 1961 as Coe Professor of American History. Among his many special appointments of high prestige were: the Harmsworth Professorship at Oxford University, the Walgreen Lectureship at the University of Chicago, and the Commonwealth Fund Lectureship at the University of London.

It was during his long tenure at Yale that David Potter earned an international reputation as one of the outstanding American historians. His first book, Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis, exemplified the historical monograph at its best. Besides presenting the results of exhaustive research in lucid and graceful prose, it combined rich narrative with analytic power and revealed a subtle understanding of what one scholar has called the "agonizing dilemmas of statesmanship." This interest in the onset of sectional conflict never waned. At his death, Potter was once more writing about the Fort Sumter crisis of 1861, as he tried, without quite succeeding, to complete his most ambitious work, a two-volume study of the coming of the Civil War for the "New American Nation Series," the most comprehensive history of the United States.

His second book displayed the breadth and originality that are now associated with the name David Potter. People of Plenty was boldly innovative. Using the insights of social psychology and cultural anthropology to interpret the whole of American history, he raised the study of national character to a new level of respectability.

A native Southerner who transcended his Southern heritage but never repudiated it, Potter thought, wrote, and taught about the South throughout his career. Here, most plainly, he revealed his rare ability to achieve critical detachment without sacrificing humane understanding. His writing on the subject was a series of essays, probably his favorite literary form, and the best of them were published three years ago in The South and the Sectional Conflict. Reviewers greeted the collection with high praise, and it was nominated for the National Book Award.

There were other kinds of writing and many other fields of interest, such as contributions to text books; a superb edition of two Gold Rush diaries; a two-volume collection of readings that pioneered the problem approach to American history; an essay on women and the American character; another on individualism in the twentieth century; still another on the historian's "explicit data and implicit assumptions," and a great many book reviews of uniformly high quality. Indeed, one of David Potter's most striking characteristics was his inability to settle for anything less than his best. Even his casual notes and memoranda were often literary gems. Long

ago taking up the study and observation of birds as his one serious avocation, he assembled a library that a professional ornithologist would envy and became, as he must, an expert in the field.

In addition to these scholarly achievements, which led one reviewer to describe him as possibly the greatest contemporary American historian, David Potter possessed and fully developed superlative talents as a teacher, which drew hundreds of students to his classes yearly. A Potter lecture was always a little masterpiece. Clearly organized, authoritative, broad in scope, penetrating in its analysis, and admirably fair in the treatment of controversial points, it was delivered in a characteristically intimate and reflective tone, which invited his auditors to share with him the pleasures and perplexities of studying the past. This desire to share was also the hallmark of his teaching in seminars and tutorials, and sharing meant that he not only aroused interest but responded with interest and even excitement to questions raised and problems posed by his students. At bottom, teaching for David Potter was less a matter of communication than one of collaboration between friends in the search for truth. No one was surprised when he received the Dinkelspiel Award for distinguished teaching in 1968.

To his department, University, and profession, David Potter gave valuable and often arduous service in many capacities over the years. His colleagues in History are especially grateful for the wisdom and skill with which he directed the affairs of the Department from 1965 to 1968. The University as a whole profited immeasurably from his conscientious work and stabilizing influence in the Academic Senate, of which he was a member since its inception. In times of crisis and passion, his was the voice of reason and often of accommodation. He had strong convictions but never refused to hear the other side. No discussion seemed complete if he was present and had remained silent.

At the time of his death on February 18, 1971, David Potter held the presidencies of the two largest organizations of professional historians in the United States. This unusual combination of honors was primarily a recognition of his standing in the wide world of scholarship. Those who knew him more intimately will remember not only David's sterling intellectual qualities but his unfailing courtesy and considerateness, his integrity, his bright wit, and his quiet fortitude, in the presence of personal tragedy. They mourn the passing of a gifted scholar and teacher, but even more poignant is the untimely loss of a good companion and noble spirit.

Don E. Fehrenbacher
Gordon A. Craig
Carl N. Degler