

HERBERT INGRAM PRIESTLEY

1875-1944

Here in the midst of this apocalyptic air war, where many fine lads are daily giving their lives, it may seem odd that the death of one old man should be singled out for commemoration. And yet it is fitting enough that they should be named together, for Herbert Ingram Priestley was ruled by a passionate love of humanity—a love that throughout his life made him fight for justice and decency, and made him at the same time the born enemy of the monstrous “new orders” that have been sickening the world for the past generation. Undeterred by an almost invincible public apathy, without regard for health or reward, Professor Priestley spoke unceasingly of the dangers that threatened us, from the time of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria to the rape of Abyssinia, from the betrayal of the Spanish Republic to the shameful “peace in our time” settlement of Munich. And, after the world had begun to pay the long price of its pusillanimity in the débâcle of 1939-40, he continued undaunted in his endeavor to arouse his countrymen to take their honorable place in the conflict. In this characteristic task he drew too heavily on his failing strength and he was struck down. So it is fitting that he should be remembered along with the boys who are also paying the price. He was not unworthy of them.

It is customary to pay tribute to a man’s scholarship in a memorial. It should not be necessary. A man’s writings will survive or disappear on their merits. Suffice it to say here that Professor Priestley’s modesty concerning his own work

went far beyond any conventional academic diffidence. In this he was less than just to himself. In my long association with him I often had occasion to disagree with him in matters of style and method, but never did my upstart criticisms draw from him a hint of impatience or resentment. Indeed, such were his bigness of spirit and his kindness and good humor that he gave too great a part of his time and energy to students and others who might better have been left to work out their own salvation. But he loved to do it, and we loved him for it. His office in the Bancroft Library was always open, and, although he roared with anguish at frequent interruptions by lost freshmen and book salesmen, somehow his door remained open—which is another way of saying that love of humanity ruled his life. That love was amply reciprocated by his students, among whom he was affectionately and not inappropriately known as “Pop.”

Not the least of Professor Priestley's loves was the Bancroft Library. His vision was to make of it an even greater repository of documents and literature in Southwest and Latin-American history and culture, as well as a workshop for their exploitation. Handicapped by a chronically inadequate budget, he kept up the collection by a constant bombardment of requests to all and sundry for donations and exchanges. His success was prodigious, as his groaning cataloguers will testify. His ambition for the library was beyond the power of one man to realize, but a multitude of scholars owe a grateful debt to the man and his staff who so willingly served in that pleasant, if crowded, workshop.

It is sad to lose an old friend, but in the case of Professor Priestley it is difficult to remain sad, for into one's memory come crowding recollections of his terrifying blasts of salty profanity, which always ended in a health-giving gale of laughter. He was a happy philosopher. As he wrote me just before his death: “It was a good life, and I don't regret it.” He could justly have added that it was a good life because he made it so.

LESLEY BYRD SIMPSON.

European Theater of Operations.
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