

## OBITUARY

### Walter Howe (1907-1966)

LEWIS HANKE

WALTER HOWE, one of the few scholars in Latin American history in the United States who have also played a role in public affairs, was born in Washington, D. C., on June 10, 1907 and died in Charlottesville, Virginia, on April 8, 1966. Most of his life was spent in Litchfield, Connecticut. His father, Ernest Howe, mining geologist and sometime advisor to the Mexican Geological Survey, early kindled his interest in both Mexico and the mining of precious metals.

A graduate and loyal alumnus of Yale, he studied Latin American history with Clarence H. Haring at Harvard and received his doctorate there in 1938. His dissertation focused on the organization and achievements of the mining guild in New Spain and was based on research in Mexican archives, 1932-1934. The topic naturally appealed to a Connecticut Yankee, because the highly centralized Spanish administration had become so worried by the decline in gold and silver production in the late eighteenth century that it allowed the Mexican mining industry to have the unusual privilege of autonomous jurisdiction: "In the midst of a system where virtually all authority, both political and economic, emanated from the crown, the most important industry in the country established itself as a self-governing community within the body politic . . . initiative came largely from below and the direct management of the enterprise was in the hands of the elected representatives of the group concerned." (p. 56) The monograph describing this unique development, published in 1949 by Harvard University Press as *The Mining Guild of New Spain and Its Tribunal General, 1770-1821* (pp. ix, 534), became at once the standard work on the subject and was recognized as one of the most substantial contributions to the history of mining in Spanish America. He never ceased to find history and historical research absorbing interests, and at the time of his death he was engaged in a study of the career of the Peruvian Viceroy Manuel de Amat y Junyent.

On completing the research for his dissertation, Walter did not follow the usual path by joining a university faculty but devoted

himself to public affairs. He represented Litchfield in the General Assembly of Connecticut 1934 to 1942 and served as Speaker of the House of Representatives 1939-1940. Among the institutions whose activities engaged his interest were the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, the Natural Resources Council, and the University of Connecticut. A retired commander, he served on active duty with the United States Navy 1941-1946 and again during the Korean conflict, 1950-1951. Beginning in 1954 he directed the American technical assistance program in Colombia for several years and received from the National University there its Medal of Merit.

His last and most important post was as Ambassador to Chile 1958 to 1961, during the second administration of President Eisenhower, a period of tension marked by Vice-President Nixon's ill-fated trip to South America and by the coming of Castro to power in Cuba. When President Eisenhower visited Chile in March 1960 a student group bitterly criticized United States policies, charging that the government supported dictators and was opposed to necessary social and economic reforms in Latin America. The President challenged this denunciation and promised that the students would receive a more detailed reply through Ambassador Howe. The reply, on April 8, stirred up more student discussion and provoked an angry fifteen-page rebuttal by President Osvaldo Dorticós of Cuba, for the Howe statement constituted one of the strongest attacks on Castro and his regime up to that time. As one member of the American Embassy staff in Chile remarked to me, Howe surprised and pleased both Chileans and the staff because he not only looked like an ambassador but spoke excellent Spanish and moved easily in intellectual circles.

He was a contemplative and cultivated person whose evident sincerity and natural charm won the respect and affection of those who knew him. Surviving are his widow, Jane, four sons, and four granddaughters.