

Mims, Edwin ^[1]

Mims, Edwin

by J. Isaac Copeland, 1991

27 May 1872–15 Sept. 1959

Edwin Mims, educator and teacher of American and English literature, was born in Richmond, Ark., a village near Little Rock, the son of Andrew Jackson, an Arkansas merchant, and Cornelia Williamson Mims. At age thirteen Edwin was sent to Webb School at Bell Buckle, Tenn., and in 1892 he was graduated from [Vanderbilt University](#) ^[2] with a bachelor of arts degree. After receiving a master of arts degree in 1893, he remained at Vanderbilt an additional year as a Fellow in English. He spent the academic year 1896–97 in graduate study at Cornell University and was awarded a Ph.D. degree in 1900.

Mims's long and distinguished career is generally remembered in association with Vanderbilt University, but he spent the first decades of his professional life in North Carolina. From 1894 through the school year 1909 he was professor of English at [Trinity College](#) ^[3] (now [Duke University](#) ^[4]), and from 1909 to 1912 he held a similar appointment at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5]. In the fall of 1912 Mims returned to Nashville and Vanderbilt, yet he retained warm and lasting relationships with North Carolina friends, including [Frank Porter Graham](#) ^[6] and [Edgar W. Knight](#). ^[7]

From 1912 until his so-called retirement in 1942, Mims was chairman of Vanderbilt's English department and from 1928 to 1942 he was also chairman of the humanities division. At a dinner honoring him upon retirement, Mims announced that he would now be "professor-at-large." This was literally true because he remained active as an author, teacher, and lecturer almost until the time of his death. Retirement meant only that he was free to widen his sphere of influence. In early June 1949, at age seventy-seven, Mims delivered an address to a Vanderbilt alumni group on Friday and was its dinner guest in the evening, attended a Duke University alumni banquet in Durham on Saturday evening, addressed a large group of his former Trinity College students on Sunday, and was in Chapel Hill on Monday to attend a reception and the graduation exercises at The University of North Carolina.

Professor Mims was the author of *Sidney Lanier* ^[8] (1905), *The Advancing South* (1926), *Adventurous America* (1929), and *Chancellor Kirkland* (1940). After retirement came *Great Writers as Interpreters of Religion* (1945), the *History of Vanderbilt University* (1946), and *Christ of the Poets* (1948).

It was in the classroom, however, that Mims exercised his greatest influence. Generations of Vanderbilt students committed to memory countless passages of great literature—both prose and poetry—and, furthermore, they understood the contents. Mims had a gift for reading poetry aloud and firing his students with a love for literature. Also, at a time when scholarly writing was emphasized in English departments and set as a standard for promotion, Mims made the decision to give equal recognition to creative writing. Vanderbilt appears to have been the first institution in this country to have adopted such a policy, and it was undoubtedly one of the reasons why writing flourished there in the 1920s more than in other colleges.

Mims frequently taught at other institutions during the summer sessions—among them [George Peabody College for Teachers](#) ^[9], [Johns Hopkins University](#) ^[10], [University of Virginia](#) ^[11], [University of Southern California](#), [Carnegie Tech](#) ^[12], [University of Texas](#), and [Duke](#). In 1935–36 he was Carnegie Visiting Professor at St. Andrew's University (Scotland), Trinity College (Dublin), the universities of London and Wales, and the University of the Southwest (Exeter, England). He also was in demand as a lecturer, and before the public he displayed the same zest for literature that made his classes notable.

After retirement, in addition to his writing, Mims taught for short periods at [Emory University](#), ^[13] [Rollins College](#) ^[14] (Winter Park, Fla.), the University of Florida, Florida State University, and Stetson University (De Land, Fla.). For one year he was a special lecturer for the New School for Social Research in New York City, and for two years he was a lecturer for Phi Beta Kappa and the [American Association of Colleges and Universities](#) ^[15].

His effectiveness as a teacher is evident in the tributes paid him by former students, many of them men and women who had become leaders in the business and professional world. In the field of creative writing, few teachers have been privileged to have influenced so many writers as did Dr. Mims. Among his students were Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate, Merrill Moore, and Jesse Stuart. John Crowe Ransom was not a part of this group but was closely associated with its members and with Mims.

Less known is the story of Mims's work with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which in its early years was called the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools of the Southern States. In 1895 he was appointed a delegate to the first meeting and seven years later was the association's president. For a number of years thereafter, he was a member of the executive committee.

Mims was a member of the [Methodist church](#) ^[16]. In 1902–3 he served with the joint hymn book commission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, North and South. In June 1898 he married Clara Puryear, of Paducah, Ky., the daughter of a tobacco broker of that city. They had four children: Edwin, Catherine Puryear, Thomas Puryear, and Ella Puryear.

Edwin Mims was an untiring humanist, educator, and professor of English who, for over six decades, was a vital force in higher education in the South. He was a member of the faculty of three leading southern universities and a lecturer on countless campuses. In the summer of 1959 he was preparing a collection of essays on higher education when a fall, resulting in a fractured hip, confined him to a nursing home for the last weeks of his life. Funeral services were held at Nashville's West End Methodist Church, with burial in Woodlawn Memorial Park.

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