

Nelson, Ernest William ^[1]

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by C. Sylvester Green ^[2], 1991

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Ernest William Nelson, educator and historian, was born in Brockton, Mass., the son of William and Elizabeth Nelson. After completing his elementary and secondary schooling in Brockton, he entered Clark University, Worcester, Mass., in the fall of 1912 and was graduated with honors and a bachelor of arts degree in 1916. He served for four years in the U.S. Army and earned a master of arts degree from Clark in 1920.

During the session of 1920–21 Nelson was a resident Andrew D. White Fellow in European history at Cornell University ^[3], Ithaca, N.Y., and the next year (1921–22) he was an Andrew D. White Traveling Fellow at the University of Paris. After further graduate work at Cornell (1922–23), he taught history at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion. He was awarded a doctor of philosophy degree by Cornell in 1925 and taught there during the following session. In September 1926 he joined the faculty of Duke University ^[4], where he was professor of history for forty years (1926–66).

On his retirement in 1966, Nelson lived with a son, Duncan M., in Sudbury, Mass. After his death in Sudbury, a memorial service was held in Concord, Mass., on 23 Sept. 1974, with interment in the same city.

After going to Duke, Nelson taught in the summer session of the University of Chicago (1929) and was a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies ^[5] (1930–31) for travel and study in Italy. His interest in Italy began during his military tour of duty, when he spent considerable time in that country as well as in Germany, Switzerland, and France. He also taught in the summer session of 1947 at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

At Duke, Nelson established a reputation as a cultural historian. His major field of interest was Italian Renaissance history. It has been written of him that "he was of the old school of teaching, molded in the European tradition which emphasizes the language, literature, and art of a people, not just the record of past events. His special interests were in Renaissance civilization, the history of liberty and ideas of tolerance, church-state relationships, Italian origins of modern diplomacy and balance-of-power relationships. His cluttered office across the hall from the music room in the East Duke Building held a large collection of books, prints, letters and photographs embodying almost every aspect of the cultural history of Europe."

In the classroom, Nelson was a constant stimulus to his students, many of whom pursued further graduate work and ultimately became teachers and writers of history. Of gentle manner, he was an unobtrusive scholar and avid reader. He continually interpreted modern events in the light of the philosophy and facts of history.

The volume of his own writings was much less than the volume he inspired. From his year of travel and study in Italy, he produced several chapters for major historical works, including "Heresies and the Inquisition," in the *Guide to the Study of Medieval History* (1931); "The Theory of Persecution," in *Persecution and Liberty: Essays in Honor of George Lincoln Burr* (1931); and "The Origins of Modern Balance-of-Power Politics," in *Medievalia et Humanistica* (1943). A frequent contributor to the *Journal of Modern History*, he wrote numerous book reviews for that and other scholarly journals.

Nelson held membership in the American Historical Association ^[6], Mediaeval Academy, Southern Historical Association ^[7], American Association of University Professors, Clark University Scholarship Society, and Phi Beta Kappa honorary society. His outstanding extracurricular activity at Duke was the organization (1945) of the Duke Chamber Arts Society, a sponsorship that established a lasting tradition at Duke through its annual series of popular programs of chamber music.

In 1927 Nelson married Rowena Morse of Ithaca. They had four children: Elizabeth Burr, Duncan Morse, William Evan, and George Anthony. They were divorced in 1943, and he never remarried.

References:

Data File (Office of Information Services, Duke University, Durham).

Duke Alumni Register (January 1975).

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