

Charles E. Merriam
AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE MAN & HIS PAPERS
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The University of Chicago is one of a select group of significant institutions in the development of modern American intellectual life. Like all of that group, the university is a product of factors more complex than public rhetoric or private gossip ever makes clear. There is a literature of legends, a continuing folklore, that serves to outline a history; but it rests on an uneven alternation between realization and hope, smoothed in perspective as one generation's dreams become another generation's memories. The significant faculty, frequently cited as the source of the university's distinction, are themselves the products of similar institutions where learning and teaching take place. The aura is shared. The interdependence may be so profound that the closest examination may blur the lines rather than sharpen them, making the real questions of judgment tantalizingly obscure.

Archives such as those of the University of Chicago open the possibility of an examination different from the more traditional approaches dependent upon the public record: the publications of faculty, the speeches and articles of university administrators, and prizes and awards. Important though these obviously are, they reveal more about the visible glow than the complex of energies which created it. The daily flow, uneven but continuous, generated by a capacity for commitment capable of withstanding the everyday frustrations, makes the public record an approximation of whatever truth there is. The archival record tells us more.

The papers of Charles E. Merriam provide an intimate view of the working life of the University of Chicago and of the academic and political worlds in which he moved. At the same time they tell us much about the crucial years of the university's first half-century, Chicago's growth into an urban-industrial center, and the nation's modernization and internationalization. The size of the collection dwarfs those of similar personalities and testifies to his extensive involvement in the events of his period. When Charles E. Merriam died at the age of seventy-eight, his papers consisted of seventy-seven file drawers containing correspondence, manuscripts, diaries, and memoranda.

At that time, 1953, universities were less inclined to preserve such records except by accident or for purposes specific to the institution. (Indeed, it was only in 1934 that the federal government embarked on a systematic preservation of its records, despite pleas from historians dating back to the last decade of the nineteenth century.) The academic as public servant, let alone as significant formulator of public policy, was still a relatively new figure on the political landscape; and historians were inclined more toward collecting the aging memories of the survivors through interviews and memoirs than toward perusing the crumbling pages of second sheets never intended for preservation. The true utility of the written record should have come as no surprise. The University of Chicago was planned as a

great institution, to influence public policy with distinction and to improve not only American civilization but also the human condition. The Merriam papers, like all of the university's archives, are what give us the most accurate record possible of that effort.

Charles E. Merriam's name is associated with an attitude embodied in the work of a professional generation: the behavioral movement in political science. He promoted an enthusiasm and a commitment to it. The continuing responsibility to social research, to the training for future research, and to the sustaining of the goals of American society motivating that research were all based on a realistic view. He saw the limitations of American politics, the problems of the public and private duty to the funding of research, and the necessity of personal involvement with community according to the classic meaning of citizenship.

"Reform" was the term his times often repudiated. If he himself accepted the leadership of movements designed to present alternatives, it was with an engaging smile, an anecdotal humor capable of bearing the burden of history lightly as though it were the saga of a family one loved in spite of everything.

MERRIAM AND THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Merriam began his career at the University of Chicago in 1900. He retired in 1940 but remained on the faculty part time until 1947, six years before his death. The university was scarcely completing its first decade when he joined it, and he celebrated its anniversaries as moments of his own career.

Merriam was not one of the academic luminaries recruited by William Rainey Harper. Being a newly fledged Ph.D., Merriam would not have been accorded the term "scholar" then and wore the title with bemusement throughout most of his career. In this beginning position he suffered the daily burdens of the new institution striving to be great but committed at the same time to the ordinary tasks irrelevant to greatness. Under such Germanic titles as "Docent" and at salaries bearing little relation to the university's national reputation, young men like Merriam began careers at the bottom. Each reward was a small recompense for labors more critical to the life of the institution than its leaders ever seemed to understand.

Merriam's fame and the university's grew together. His reputation was created within and by the university. He utilized its intellectual resources to model his own ambitions long before he really began to contribute to them in any genuinely significant fashion, though he didn't regard the situation that way in the complaining letters he wrote to his teachers. The impact upon his own work of the proximity of such figures as John Dewey, Albion Small, W. I. Thomas, even Thorstein Veblen, shaped his sense of his place in the university

before he had begun to establish himself as a scholar in his own right. Loyalty to the university and the city—to both of them in a curious and important conjunction with one another—became the force behind the movement in political science known as “the Chicago School”—not as the “Merriam School.” The city and its university were the essential resources and Merriam knew that a good deal better than many who observed him tended to suspect.

Borrowing much from the spirit of Chicago’s sociologists, Merriam sought to ally the tradition of local involvement in social research with a national program for training scholars. The formation of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in 1923 paralleled the establishment of the Local Community Research Committee at the university. The two organizations, both influenced by Merriam’s entrepreneurial skills, brought together national philanthropic support and local philanthropic enthusiasm to join research and reform in a new, sophisticated partnership.

Throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s Merriam’s ambitions were represented in the stellar group of political scientists brought to and trained by the university. Leonard D. White, Harold D. Lasswell, Harold Gosnell, Quincy Wright, and V. O. Key, Jr., name only the best known of this group. The leadership within the profession has borne and continues to bear the mark of the Merriam years.

The Social Science Research Building dedicated in 1929 was the culmination of Merriam’s efforts to establish the university as a national center for social research. Crucial to realizing that ambition was his productive friendship with Beardsley Rumml, young genius of the new philanthropy in the years after World War I and the first dean of the Social Sciences Division at the university. The very design and decoration of the building were intended to stimulate what the building represented: the primary role of research.

Merriam was successful in bringing Louis Brownlow to Chicago in 1931 to head the newly formed Public Administration Clearing House. The building on 1315 East Sixtieth Street gave that and the many other organizations of public administrators brought to Chicago by Merriam and Brownlow a Midwest base of operations close to the university. The center was also far away from what they both believed to be the not altogether salutary influences of Washington and the eastern intellectual establishment.

MERRIAM AND THE CITY OF CHICAGO

Much has been written about the university’s status as a national institution—and that was Harper’s aim. Merriam’s career reflects an aspect of the institution’s history closer to the facts. Merriam also represented many of the faculty’s ideals in those earlier years,

particularly after Harper’s death when the university had to be judged by what it could do rather than by what it could promise. What sophisticates on the faculty sometimes derided as provincialism was in fact a local pride trying to make the nation see the basis of an affection capable of designating Chicago the “most American” of American cities. Chicago was America’s new city; and its intellectual boosters believed it would remain so eternally. The university’s gothic exterior gave a certain historic stability to the same drive without attempting to conceal it. The city and the university shared a promise, a responsibility, and an historical respectability.

A series of political events all associated ultimately with the development of Progressive politics drew Merriam into the city. He had involved himself almost from the beginning of his career at the university in the various commissions and citizen reform groups backing urban change. The Burnham Plan, the Harbor Commission, and the movement for charter reform were examples. By 1907 his potential as a political force led him directly to reform politics and to the city council. His service as alderman quickly established him for the next quarter of a century as the reform community’s resident mayoralty prospect. The near success on several occasions gave him more authority than the losses themselves can indicate. His 1911 campaign against Carter Harrison (the son of the first Mayor Carter Harrison) became a legend among his students and his admirers; but like most legends it obscures something less spectacular but more enduring. His ability to lead and focus scattered reform groups around his candidacy meant that partisan opponents could not count on the usual divisiveness that characterized reform movements. Merriam knew his constituency; but he respected politics as a profession and admired the professionals who managed it. During that brief ascendancy of academia in politics which was part of the Progressive movement—Woodrow Wilson was the professor-president and Merriam the “Woodrow Wilson of the West”—Merriam seemed headed for national political prominence.

The 1911 campaign brought him his first offer of national service, on President Taft’s Committee on Economy and Efficiency, headed by Frederick A. Cleveland; but Merriam refused. His backing of Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive party candidacy in 1912 brought him closest to one of the leaders he most admired.

The ascendancy of William Hale (Big Bill) Thompson in Chicago politics could have marked the end of Merriam’s influence in the city; but he continued to fight, backing first Mayor Dever and then Anton J. Cermak in his sustained efforts to break the power of the Thompson machine. Cermak’s assassination in 1933 pushed Merriam once again into prominence as a candidate, but his identification with Progressive reform—by then looked upon as nativist and divisive by

regulars of both parties—continued to work against him. Nonetheless, he fought through the best means he had; he continued to support academic investigations of Chicago politics and on various boards he examined and criticized public services. Some of the most exciting studies of the Chicago political scene by Merriam's students and colleagues are double edged documents intended both to enrich the discipline and to sustain reform politics in the city of Chicago.

MERRIAM AND THE NATIONAL SCENE

Although historians continue to examine the effect of World War I on the thrust of reform politics, its effect on Merriam's career was clear. His service in Italy for the Creel Committee gave him an unusual position from which to view one of the first American efforts at modern international counterintelligence. Although he expected his status as "Captain Merriam" to be useful to him in his 1919 mayoralty campaign against the anti-war Thompson, he was wrong. His defeat in the primary campaign was devastating. While Merriam continued to wield power in local politics after 1920, it was a power based on influence rather than on direct participation. His stature as an academic and as representative of the university's role in relating research to reform came increasingly to define his position in the new politics of the 1920's.

New Aspects of Politics, essays on the prospects of a new political science, appeared in 1925, the year he was president of the American Political Science Association. He had already served as the chief organizing force in the founding of the SSRC and was actively engaged in numerous other national organizations of the growing group of academic professionals concerned with public policy at all levels. Merriam was already having a profound impact on the distribution of funds for academic research throughout the country.

Recent Social Trends, which appeared in January of 1933, was perhaps one of the most significant documents in American social research ever produced and one of the most easily forgotten. A stellar cast of American social researchers spent almost an entire presidential administration searching for the evidence on which to base a program of scientific reform. Few of the documents of Merriam's career—or indeed of his entire generation—more accurately reflect the dilemmas or the triumphs of American social science.

The New Deal provided Merriam with his most effective influence on national policy-making through the group which came to be known ultimately as the National Resources Planning Board. Formed initially as a committee to advise Interior Secretary Harold Ickes in his capacity as administrator of Public Works, the group represented American academia's most significant and systematic introduction to presidential

policy-making. Its seventy-odd reports compiled over a decade—1933 to 1943—fulfill and extend the ambitions of *Recent Social Trends* and constitute even today the most comprehensive effort at intelligent formulation of social policy ever undertaken by an official presidential agency.

The President's Committee on Administrative Management, headed by Louis Brownlow, included Merriam and Luther Gulick. Its report in 1937 became one of the major statements in the history of the organization of the presidency; and the reorganizations of the presidency since have all, in one way or another, traced their basic sense of the office back to that document. Merriam's contribution to that report was a philosophy of American planning ultimately rejected by Congress in the late days of World War II as "socialistic"; yet the work remains today a moment of insight in American governmental thought, unique in its efforts to modernize an American tradition Merriam knew to be consistent with the responsibilities of citizenship. Though Congress ultimately abolished the National Resources Planning Board in 1943, its establishment of the Council of Economic Advisers acknowledged at least the remnants of necessity. The weaknesses of that body today, its myopic focus on only one aspect of the condition of American society, stand as a mute if unintended tribute to the strength of Merriam's conception of planning.

After his official retirement Merriam continued to influence the professions he had helped create, the university which had given him his lifelong home, the city whose hopes he still thought greater than its achievements, and the nation whose future still glowed for him.

While he loved celebrations of all kinds and would have enjoyed the centennial of his birth with customary convivial enthusiasm, his archives and the life they represent may be the celebration which would have satisfied him above all; for they call on what he respected the most—continuing research. No essay—or even full length attempt at biography—can ever do justice to the life that resides in his papers. Here is what he was, in the documentation and daily practice of his professional life. No reflection or representation of it will meet the demands he met in the responsible compiling of the record. To that record must be added the record of others, even as we add to it today. For it is the continuity of life one celebrates if one celebrates in his terms, not its beginning or its end.

Access to the papers of Charles E. Merriam is granted in accordance with the University Library's *Policies and Regulations Governing the Use of Manuscript and Archival Collections*. Please direct inquiries concerning use of the Merriam papers to the University Archives, The Joseph Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago, 1100 East Fifty-Seventh Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637.