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MERRILL KELLEY BENNETT

A Tribute

We come here this Sunday afternoon to pay tribute to a dear friend and a great Stanford scholar. Merrill Bennett came to Stanford in the fall of 1922 as a young instructor in English. He was 25 years old—a veteran of the Great War. He had won the Master of Arts degree at Brown University a year earlier, at about the same time that a new Institute to study world problems of food supply and allocation was established at Stanford. Merrill Bennett's professional future was to be completely intertwined with the future of this new Institute, and to it he was to bring great strength.

Merrill joined the Institute staff as a Junior Associate in the autumn of 1923, although he continued for that first year to teach a course in the English Department. Then, or shortly thereafter, he was won to economics, and he qualified himself in that discipline with the Master's degree from Harvard in 1926 and the Doctorate of Philosophy from Stanford a year later. But his early love of good writing and good books never left him, and all the things he wrote reveal the man who knows how to use words naturally, but sparingly and precisely.

In 1933 Dr. Bennett became Executive Secretary of the Institute; in 1942 he was appointed Executive Director, and in 1952 Director; he held that post until his retirement in 1962.

When members of the professional staff of the Food Research Institute were accorded academic titles in the University in 1938, Dr. Bennett took that of Professor of Economic Geography. His scholarly contributions were by no means confined to that branch of economic investigation, however, and other titles would have been equally appropriate. He was above all the Professor of World Food Economics, and it was in pursuit of understanding of how the world's population is fed, and of how it may be fed, that he pressed his research and that of his students beyond the customary bounds of economics into geography, climatology, ethnography, nutrition, agriculture, demography, public administration, and public policy.

Dr. Bennett's research in the interwar years was primarily directed at study of the world wheat economy, but monographs and other writings of that period foreshadow some of the problems that were to attract his interest after World War II. Through this intensive study of one commodity he learned to use the commodity approach, and he taught his students how to use it, to "get a handle" on a complex research problem. The "Growth of Wheat Consumption in Tropical Countries," which was published in 1930, came 23 years before he was to initiate under his direction the Institute's sustained research into the economies of tropical Africa; "British Wheat Yield per Acre for Seven Centuries," published in 1935, stands as a classic use of fragmentary and fragile data for historical reconstruction, to be repeated in the "Food Economy of the New England Indians" in 1955 and in an unpublished manuscript on the food economy of the Inca Empire. The

knowledge and skill employed in monographs on wheat utilization, acreage, and yields in the 1930's were later employed to produce "Change in the American National Diet from 1879 to 1959," and a series of studies of the physical determinants of the distribution of farinaceous food crops in the 1950's and 1960's.

This recitation of austere titles of scholarly works might mislead the uninitiated who do not know their content. True, they were the result of quiet study, of careful sifting of evidence, of contemplation and speculation, but they were much more than this. To all that he did Merrill Bennett brought an insight and understanding, a critical sensitivity to fraud and pretence, and an acute awareness of man that fed on his knowledge of, and participation in, the world of men and their affairs. In his writing, his lectures, and his teaching there are echoes of his New England boyhood, of a summer spent working in the wheat fields of Kansas, of the artillery man in World War I, and of long years of public service. Within the University he served as Chairman of the Library Committee, as long-time Chairman of the Faculty Committee on University Publications, and from 1945 to 1948 as Dean of the School of Social Sciences. In the town he was for many years a hard-working member of the Palo Alto Library Board. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, Dr. Bennett was in Hawaii as a Guggenheim Fellow studying the food economy of the Islands. He was quickly pressed into service by the military governor as Chief Statistician in the Office of Food Control in Hawaii. From March 1944 through March 1945 he served as Chief of the Division of Food Allocations in Washington, and he was later to be a member of the prestigious Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council, of the Interdepartmental Committee on Nutrition and National Defense of the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and of the Food and Nutrition Advisory Committee of the United States Department of Agriculture. I omit mention of his service on various other University, State, and Federal committees, boards, and agencies, and of his other activities in prosecution of the war.

Many of these experiences bore fruit in Dr. Bennett's own research and in the research that he initiated and directed. His wartime duties with the United States Foreign Economic Administration helped to influence the Food Research Institute to undertake its world wide study of Food, Agriculture, and World War II that records and analyzes, in thirteen volumes, the experiences of the belligerents on both sides in the wartime administration of their food and agricultural resources. His experiences in Japan in 1947 as a member of the United States Scientific Advisory Group contributed to Institute research on Japanese food administration; and participation in the Carnegie Corporation's committee to study barriers to economic development in East Africa in 1951 laid the groundwork for a continuing major effort of the Institute. His experiences in two world wars can be felt in a most recent article on "Famine" as he tempers his optimism that "there seems no reason why true famine of natural origin should be endured in any country" with the warning that "it cannot be said that artificial famine, induced by war or revolution, may not occur again."

It was also under Dr. Bennett's directorship that the Institute initiated a formal graduate program leading to the doctorate and intended to afford students from all parts of the world an opportunity to participate in the research activities of the

Institute and to acquaint themselves with its approach to the problems of the world food economy.

For many years Merrill taught a course called the World's Food, and he sometimes said that he taught it only because there was no satisfactory book on the subject. A sabbatical year spent at Rice Institute in 1951-52 gave him an opportunity to distill in a book manuscript much of the wisdom acquired through his years of study and public service. It was only when this book, entitled *The World's Food*, was published in 1954 that he withdrew from the course and initiated an entirely new course in geographical determinants of staple food production.

Titles of books, monographs, articles, positions held, and committees served on—these are the thin documentary profile of the scholar. The imperishable reality is in the contents of what he wrote, and in the molding of the thoughts and the ideals of his students, his colleagues, and of all those who sought his advice and judgment. Each of us who had the privilege of working closely with him, whether for the ten weeks of a course of lectures or for as many years, has been changed a little by his love of truth and respect for evidence, his search for meaning and his daring to put forth new ideas, his persistent return to questions of "why?" and "what are the consequences?"; by his sympathetic encouragement of all who were groping for understanding, his insistence that research is not finished until it is published and that the final product must be free of jargon and written so that the intelligent layman will find the argument lucid and reasonable; above all by his humanity and his optimistic faith in the essential rationality and goodness of man.

William O. Jones, Director
Food Research Institute

Stanford University
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