

WILLIAM
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JOHNSON

A Portrait by
Natalie Calderwood

LAWRENCE
University of Kansas Libraries
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*Presented on the occasion
of the opening of the*

WILLIAM SAVAGE JOHNSON
MEMORIAL READING ROOM

of the

DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

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IN PREPARING this portrait of William Savage Johnson, I have talked and exchanged letters with many persons who knew him longer than I did and at other periods in his life. A few members of this audience knew him through all of his thirty-four years at the University of Kansas: they saw the young man, fresh out of the East, equipped with a Ph.D. from Yale and three years on the Yale faculty, rise through the ranks to a professorship in English, serve his department as its chairman for sixteen years, become a respected scholar and a great teacher, and a much-loved man.

I knew Will Johnson for twelve of those years, the last twelve of his life. What has interested but not surprised me during the past few weeks is the unanimity of opinion and feeling about William Savage Johnson. Whether one knew him in youth or in age, as scholar, teacher, department chairman, or just as a man, he was always Will. The reason, I suspect, is that he found himself early, early achieved "wholeness" or what one of his favorite poets, William Butler Yeats, would have called "Unity of Being." Will had many sides, many talents, but he was all of one piece—unfragmented.

The phrase which I have heard more frequently than any other in descriptions of William Savage Johnson is "scholar-gentleman." Will had been educated in the classics, in Latin and Greek, and it was

only in graduate school that he began his intensive study of English literature. He was a scholar-gentleman in the sense of Matthew Arnold's definition and use of the word *culture*—not only because of his education in the classics and his wide and deep knowledge of “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” but because literature for him, as for Arnold, was a means by which man might reach the full and harmonious development of all his powers: to use Arnold's words, “the power of conduct, the power of intellect and knowledge, the power of beauty, and the power of social life and manners.”

William Savage Johnson had his academic specialties, but (in the words of one of his close associates) “he was not a specialist who paid for his specialties at the price of his general culture. His literary loves were cultivated with the taste of an enthusiastic amateur, and writers whom he loved he assimilated as a guide to conduct, to living. Emerson, Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold meant much to him because they nourished his spirit.”

The diversity of Will Johnson's interests in literature is apparent in the books which line the walls of his library, in the courses he taught, and in the books and articles he wrote. A course in *Emerson and Carlyle* taught first at Yale and then at the University of Kansas led to a book on Carlyle—*Thomas Carlyle: A Study of His Literary Apprenticeship*,

1814-1831. This was followed by an edition of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, and by *Selections from Matthew Arnold's Prose Works*, both with introductory essays and detailed notes. His doctoral dissertation, "Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*" was subsequently published as Volume 29 of *Yale Studies in English*. It is an in-depth study of the play, and a closely edited text with glossary and notes.

The shorter publications, off-prints of which may be found in the Kansas Collection of this Library, range from a translation of the Old English *Exodus* in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* to the article "Musty, fusty Christopher"—a study of the adjective *fusty*, inspired by Tennyson's use of this word in a short epigrammatic poem addressed to Christopher North. His last published work dealt with the "Savior" motif in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers; it appeared posthumously in the magazine *American Literature*.

In the class room, Professor Johnson was primarily a lecturer. The care with which he prepared his lectures is now almost a legend; he made lecturing in the class room a fine art. I was not one of William Savage Johnson's students, but one of our associate professors in the Department of English was. I should like to read you his tribute:

Far and away the best lecturer I ever had was
William Savage Johnson. In his classes in Modern

English Poetry, Victorian Poetry, and Elizabethan Drama I found that his was a full knowledge, and all that he said was considered and ordered. It would be wrong to say that notes in his classes were easy to take, for all that he said was—and remains—valuable. I could not get it all down.

His voice was close to being perfect. The modulation, the deep, yet quiet resonance and timbre of it, especially when he read poetry, cannot be forgotten. More than that: the passages he read cannot be forgotten. He did not read for effect; he did not wish that anyone would admire him. He had no flamboyance. He was genuine. He read for the poetry itself. He the reader and he the professor, relatively speaking, had no importance. They did—the poets. He read to make others understand.

Will Johnson's interest in poetry was lifelong. In his later years, this interest deepened; his specialty, indeed, became contemporary British and American poetry. He was not one to believe that all of "the best which has been thought and said in the world" had been thought and said in the far past. In contemporary poetry he found a reflection and a measure of the currents of thought and feeling which were then, and still are, shaping this twentieth century world. He took to his classes not only a personal interest in poetry based on knowledge through study, but personal acquaintance with many of the poets whom he read and taught. It was not easy to get past the high walls and tall trees which barri-

caded Thomas Hardy's home, but Will Johnson got through—and what began as a brief appointment Hardy extended into a long visit with an invitation to stay on to tea. There was one stipulation: that the account of the visit be published, if at all, only after Hardy's death. George William Russell, the poet A.E., became Will's lifelong friend. He visited here in the Johnson home, and one of his paintings of the Irish landscape still hangs above the Johnson fireplace. It was through A.E. that Will met William Butler Yeats and had the rare privilege of being present at one of Yeats's famous Sunday evenings. Will Johnson felt comfortable with poets, and I think he was accepted by them into the great community because they sensed in him a kindred spirit. Will's careful notes, his recollections and impressions of these and many other poets whom he came to know in England and Ireland, all put down on paper immediately after his visits with them, are preserved intact. They have not as yet been published.

Will's interest in writing poetry was encouraged during his undergraduate years at Yale when he was awarded a prize in the Albert S. Cook poetry contest. But Will never had any illusions about himself as a poet. In 1938, in a review of a book of Kansas poetry, he said something which he might have said of himself—for he thought of himself as a Kansas poet. He said, "Kansas may well take a modest pride in her

poets. None of them is great, but minor poetry has its mission, which major poetry cannot perform. It can help to reveal and to endear to its readers the soil from which it springs.”

Although Will wrote on a variety of subjects, many of his poems perform the function he described in this review. He loved everything in the natural world; he loved especially the Kansas landscape—the great empty spaces, the clear blue of the Kansas sky, the plough-turned brown fields, the mouse-breast juncos that came to his crumb-filled board during the late April snow. Although he was a master at witty and humorous verse, he reveals in his serious lyric poems one of his many sides not elsewhere observable, for he was a New Englander with the New Englander’s outer reserve.

Some of Will’s poetry appeared in print during his lifetime—in the *Yale Courant* and the *Yale Literary Magazine*, in the *Boston Transcript*, and *The Harp*, an extraordinarily good Kansas magazine of poetry no longer published, but most of it has remained unpublished. Will wrote principally just for the pleasure of writing poetry. It is now, however, in the process of being published, by the Bayberry Hill Press of Meriden, Connecticut, which is the private press of Foster Johnson, Will Johnson’s nephew. It is quite likely that Will’s recollections of early twentieth century poets will also, in time, be

published. Those who have seen some of the beautiful products of Foster Johnson's press know that the material is in good hands.

Chauncey Brewster Tinker, who was a classmate of Will Johnson's at Yale, is credited with the story that one year there were two W. S. Johnsons in the student body. In order to distinguish them, our Will was addressed as Savage Johnson in all news stories and announcements. This, I am told, occasioned much mirth among his fellow students, for our Will was about as un-savage a person as one could imagine. It must have occasioned much mirth in Will also, for he was a person with perspective, and, like all people with perspective, sensitive to the incongruous. He had a vein of humor which ran deep.

One of Will's close friends, who is no longer on our campus, wrote this about him: "The dominant feature of Will Johnson's character was the Aristotelian virtue of Mansuetude, or Mildness, which is pictured as a principal ingredient in the virtue of Courtesy. His Mildness was not a matter of shyness or timidity. It was partly consideration for others."

Consideration for others was basic in Will's character because he had both sensitivity and imagination, the kind which enabled him to project himself into someone else's place. But he had in addition a very genuine interest in others than himself. This combination of qualities made him a delightful con-

versationalist and a memorable host, and it accounts for what someone called his "rightness" on all occasions, his ability always to strike the exactly right note—whether he was presiding over a discussion, composing witty verses for a Phi Beta Kappa chapter meeting, or introducing Robert Frost to an audience.

I am sure that the same combination of qualities—sensitivity, imagination, interest in others—was responsible for his success as a department chairman. I think that the greatest tribute to Will Johnson's chairmanship of the Department of English came inadvertently from someone who probably knew him longer than anyone else in the department—our respected and beloved Josephine Burnham. When I asked her if she considered Will Johnson a good department chairman, she was surprised—startled, indeed. She replied, "Why I've never thought about it, so I suppose he must have been." Later, after she had thought about it, she wrote this:

The spirit of the Department was always, I believe, good—professional and cooperative; yet, since human groupings generally entail problems of one sort or another, we had to meet our share. As such occasions arose, I admired the staunchness and the clear-headed objective attitude which Professor Johnson brought to bear. He was never autocratic; he listened thoughtfully to the opinions of his colleagues, but his prime consideration was for the public good.

The mildness of Will Johnson's manner and his courtesies did not preclude the courage to fight for his convictions when essentials were at stake, but he could do so without giving offense.

The William Savage Johnson Reading Room in the Department of Special Collections in this new wing of Watson Library is not so named, however, because William Savage Johnson was a successful chairman of the Department of English for sixteen years. It is so named because he was a scholar and a teacher and a great man. Nevertheless, a chairman exerts an influence which can determine the quality of his department and the entire university long after he is gone. This Will Johnson did. During his chairmanship of the Department of English, he served on many important policy-making committees; the doctoral program was added to the department offerings; an Honors program in English was established. But more important than anything else he appointed to this faculty, and they are still with us, John Nelson, Clyde Hyder, William Paden, and as a young instructor one George Waggoner, who is now Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

I wonder sometimes if the William Savage Johnson type of university professor is about to disappear from university campuses—to their great loss. I am not sure at this moment what type of professor is emerging from the pressures of mid-twentieth cen-

ture life, which unfortunately do not by-pass the campus. But I am sure that whatever greatness the University of Kansas has achieved during its nearly one-hundred years is due in large part to its scholars and teachers of the William Savage Johnson kind. Those of us who have been here for a long time know who they were: they stand out unmistakably in the history of the University of Kansas.

I want to believe that the name of William Savage Johnson, given to the Reading Room in the Department of Special Collections in this library, is not only a nostalgic tribute to the past but an affirmation of values—past, present, and future.

When William Savage Johnson died, the University Senate paid a tribute to him in the form of a resolution which bears the signatures of H. B. Hungerford, H. B. Chubb, and J. H. Nelson. I can do no better than close with one statement in that resolution:

William Savage Johnson represented as nearly as one faculty member can the ideal of the cultivated, the liberally educated man—the kind of man which it should be the business of universities to produce and to sustain.