

## Studies in English, New Series

---

Volume 10

Article 4

---

1-1-1992

### Ralph Leslie Rusk

Eleanor M. Tilton

*Barnard College, Columbia University (Emerita)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Tilton, Eleanor M. (1992) "Ralph Leslie Rusk," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 10 , Article 4.

Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new/vol10/iss1/4](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol10/iss1/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in English, New Series* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

**RALPH LESLIE RUSK**

Eleanor M. Tilton

*Emerita, Barnard College, Columbia University*

On the 29th of February 1912, a night-letter went out from New York City to Windsor, Missouri. It read:

Have a two year offer fourteen hundred first year probably fifteen hundred second English instructor university of Philippines Manila free transportation from here around the world regular college work chance for advanced work probably save half salary no danger to health must decide tomorrow night will consult professor first probably accept.

Even at twenty-three Ralph Leslie Rusk knew what facts were essential for a particular purpose and in what order to put them. The addressee was his father who was determined to provide for all seven of his children advanced education,<sup>1</sup> but who apparently wanted also to keep them close to home. The elder Rusk, wiring his preference promptly, evoked from his son a four-page letter as carefully detailed and ordered as the night-letter—masterly compositions both. These documents speak eloquently to a former student of Professor Rusk. Here is both the man one knew and the man who was “hard to know.” He had not given way to what he called his father’s “natural parental impulse” to protect his offspring. From this initial diagnosis, the letter moves to convince the elder Rusk that the decision to accept the job was made in a “cool, reasonable way, without allowing any heat of enthusiasm to affect...judgment.”

In spite of sweet reason, the letter suggests a pressing desire—the desire to travel. There is, after all, romance in the phrase “around the world.” The young man allows himself to admit that the prospect of a long voyage is not unappealing. And once there I suspect he enjoyed hastening his letters to Miss Clara Gibbs with extra postage that they might go the faster “via Siberia.” Rusk would be a traveller all his life, a traveller who wanted to see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears. The self-appointed teacher of his four sisters, he had begun their education with geography; he would describe for them in lively detail his first visit to a city; and later provide them with his own translations of French and German poetry. It was not just for scholarship that he followed Emerson’s journeys from Philae to Craigenputtock. Nor was it to find Achille Murat’s grave that he travelled by bus through the

South, renting lodgings in private houses, calling on those who might welcome him. Here was no tourist his eye on sights, seeking the comfort and convenience of recommended hotels, nor the dry scholar intent only on the past. It was not to find Emerson that he took (by local transport) a visiting nephew to Jones Beach as well as to the Cloisters. The nephew recalls an impromptu lecture on one of the Unicorn tapestries; the talk drew a crowd of attentive listeners. Not alone for professional reasons, Rusk welcomed the invitation to Heidelberg (1948). The better to realize his desire to know at first hand places, people, and cultures at home and abroad, he kept alive the languages he had learned. In Manila he promptly found a tutor. I once expressed an Emersonian doubt of the value of travel and was promptly rebuked. "I do not agree with you." In his letter of 2 March, Rusk does not trouble to argue the certain advantage of knowledge of another culture.

Carefully planned as it is, the letter does not altogether chill the heat of another enthusiasm. The writer is moved by strong ambition. That teaching was to be his profession was probably a foregone conclusion. His grandfather and father had been teachers; he had begun practicing on his sisters before the youngest was even in school. William H. Rusk, though for his health banished from the schoolroom to the farm, had given his son every encouragement. He had provided the maps for the geography lessons and did not rebuke his hand when the avid reader absorbed in a book rested his team longer than needed. At a sacrifice acknowledged in the letter, he sent his youngest son to the University of Illinois to study literature. The move to Columbia after two years of high-school teaching revealed a new world. The young man found out "that a Ph.D. is almost absolutely necessary now for any considerable advancement in the English departments of first-class American Colleges and Universities. It is the only means of entrance into the 'charmed circle' as they call it; and it's that very circle I am bound for...."

Whatever the immediate attraction of the job in Manila, ambition required the complement of prudence. Rusk consulted three friends<sup>2</sup> who concurred in thinking the salary a generous one that would allow him to save for the necessary second year in residence. There is nothing to show that he had a subject for the all-important dissertation. No one of these advisers had then or later any interest in the new field of American Literature; nor is there any evidence that the name of William Peterfield Trent had drawn him to Columbia. When he set out for Manila in 1912, he probably did not know that Governor of the Islands was Emerson's grandson.<sup>3</sup>

Rusk had come to Columbia to continue his study of romantic poetry. As a boy and young man he not only read and learned poetry by heart, and translated it; he wrote it. He read and recited it for his sisters' pleasure. He even gathered his poems and translations together, illustrated and bound them as gift for his mother. According to his sisters, his taste was for the romantic and heroic. And he provided serial fictions of his own devising for their amusement and for neighboring children. Perhaps now it can be revealed that the secret project that engaged the retired scholar's attention was the writing of a novel. He destroyed it as he destroyed the volume of poetry after his mother's death. If this side of Rusk comes as a surprise to his former students, they are bound to admit that he was as severe a critic of his own work as he was of theirs.

Not a man to sacrifice judgment to feeling, he observed that the romantic poets were scarcely a new topic in learned journals; he turned to a field only just beginning to be studied. On his return for his second year in residence, he would find at Columbia Jay B. Hubbell with whom fourteen years later he would help to edit the first learned journal devoted to American literature. He must have found his dissertation subject fairly soon after he returned from the Philippines, though he was surely already initiated into the conception that the dissertation should be "a contribution to knowledge." His reading showed him that however far historians had taken their study of the middle-western frontier, the literature had received scant attention. The "contribution" might well be made here. The University of Indiana where he would teach for ten years was a good base from which to work.

His first publication, however, is not the two-volume dissertation but "The Adventures of Gilbert Imlay" (1923). As a student of Shelley he would have heard of Imlay, whose novel *The Emigrants* had "for some time but with extremely doubtful right, the distinction of being the first important fiction of the pioneer settlers of the West." Here is a link at least between the early interest and the later. And considering Imlay's entanglement in French political intrigue, one would like to make another. As a boy, Rusk had been entranced by Napoleon; he must have learned something of French history. The delight of his childhood was to reconstruct (with tacks) the great Napoleonic battles. I would not venture to suggest that the reenactment of a Napoleonic campaign is good training for scholarly research, but it would certainly teach the player something of how to plan. From the age of eight, according to a sister, he was a planner.

The Imlay essay (a dense 26 pages) certainly required planning. Bristling with footnotes, it foreshadows the two-volume work of 1925. The thoroughness of the research shows patience and perseverance, virtues that scholarship requires. Rusk had help. On Christmas day 1915, he had married Clara Gibbs. As long as I knew him, Rusk never spoke of his own work in the first person singular. From Rome, 1939, he writes: "We search old newspapers as usual..."; from Concord, 1945: "We work from Monday to Friday at the Emerson house...." And before I knew him, in a letter of 1922 to his sister Ruth, he reports "our schedule is dragging a bit—each library requires somewhat longer than we planned." A student's astonishment at the amount of work a scholar had produced evoked the remark: "Well, he must have a good wife." Rusk's plural pronoun might sometimes include his daughter; it always included his wife.

As well as painstaking research, the Imlay essay demonstrates careful writing and skilful composition. Although encrusted with footnotes, the essay carries its burden of detail smoothly. The easy movement is the more remarkable because so much of the evidence is indirect, evidence in which moreover there are yawning gaps. A man of integrity, Rusk was never tempted to bridge gulfs with speculation or brighten shadowy places with fictions. What it was "impossible to know" he would not invent. All Rusk's work is so easy to read that jejune critics who apparently prefer to be tormented by tortuous speculation or dazzled by fictions may never see the solidity of the content or recognize the skilful composition. In the Imlay essay, he creates out of verifiable fact the sketch of a character the more real because still puzzling, and gives a narrative of events the more exciting because of unsolved mysteries.

In the ten years between 1915 and 1925 he must have perfected the orderly habits that conserved time for the exacting research he asked of himself and would ask of his students. When he returned to Columbia with the manuscript of the dissertation, he had to know the magnitude of what he had accomplished as well as the limits of his knowledge of American literature, limits he would candidly admit to one of the graduate students he took over from Trent. He had, however, made a "contribution to knowledge" of major importance and continuing use. He was qualified for entrance into that "charmed circle" he had learned of in 1911. Without the degree he reached the rank of Associate Professor at Indiana; with it, he joined the graduate faculty of Columbia University, becoming a full professor in 1935.

Heir to W. P. Trent, for the next twenty-nine years Rusk guided a succession of sometimes puzzled, sometimes exasperated, and

sometimes terrified students toward the degree. He acquired the reputation of being the university's "hardest taskmaster." The focus of his concern with us and for us was the dissertation. From hindsight his single-minded attention to the dissertation shows a sense of proportion then beyond youthful comprehension. He left the selection of courses to us; the successive hurdles that culminated in the matriculation orals were of slight importance in his eyes. I remember being taken aback by his offhand reply to my question about the orals. He was untroubled when a student did badly or failed it. Of one who did "rather poorly," he writes in his private notes: "but I have faith in his ability to write—and to write criticism in particular." Providing questions for another who had failed, he writes to the chairman declaring the candidate a "good man," by which he meant that the student could write well, could do research, and had an independent mind; these criteria show up repeatedly in the private notes. What he wanted from his students was a good book—a good book, after all, could last, could make its author's reputation. Of a dissertation that had not been quickly accepted for publication, he wrote the chairman: "I am ashamed that so good a book should not find a publisher." He begrudged any excess time a student might spend on teaching or on any interest outside the dissertation. If, in the course of his own work, he came upon manuscripts or references useful to ours, he promptly shared it, and there was pleasure in reciprocating. I believe that the "charmed circle" he had had in mind for himself he had in mind also for his students.<sup>4</sup>

Turning consistently on the three criteria, the notes report the signs that warranted doubts. Those who could not impose coherent and rational order on their materials and those given to groundless speculation were not promising. He preserved a one-page sampling from a fifteen-page outline that showed only too plainly that the composer had no sense of order, proportion, or discrimination. No comment is attached to the sample; none is needed. The scholar has only here to let the facts speak for themselves. Another student, an enthusiast in every sense of the word, had proved in his first seminar report that Emerson was a "mystic" only and, in the next report, that he was a "stoic" only. The note concludes: "I fear that a considerable part of his report on the stoics was from intuition rather than research but he has a genuine interest in philosophy—but he EXAGGERATES." The caps appear doubly expressive.

No one who knew him will be surprised that the notes are scrupulously fair. Rusk was a just man and no one ever doubted it. One note is suggestive. A seminar was entertained with a detailed Freudian interpretation of Cooper. Rusk records a sample. There is no

word in the recording that suggests an intent to satirize the student or even the method, but the latter is surely the effect. For the rest the record shows that the report included some excellent criticism and was very well written, both observations repeated in next year's note. What Rusk expected of criticism is clear from another note reporting a student's "close reading" of a poem. He does not say that he found the painstaking line-by-line interpretation (an undergraduate exercise at best) tedious; more serious in his eyes is the student's submission to the text; the work was not a free critical judgment of the poem as well- or ill-made.

As a critic of his student's work, Rusk used familiar devices, but he appears to have used them with more consistency than most of us do. Downright errors were corrected at once. Weaknesses of style were dealt with by positive suggestions, but not by specific picking at the text. Weakness of reasoning and inadequacy of evidence were countered by direct questions. Suggestion met labored or incoherent organization; some other scheme to be tried out was proposed. Such suggestions were likely "to wait till whole book is in rough draft." A "stickler for good writing" and insistent on "deliberate and careful work," Rusk did not impose his style on his students nor force his way of thought upon them. As more than one former student now gratefully recalls, Rusk "did everything he could to help me make it a good book." He might see that a student's "difficulty will be to select the right parts and weave them into a firmly patterned and smooth narrative" or that another must "find the proper way of saying the right things without so much formality and stiffness." And from a letter to me: "The job you have still to do is to be charged up to your lack of patience with detail....In the notes you are at your worst." True, the consequence of this thoughtful help might be another year's research and another year's revision. Some of his students fled to lower ground where the terrain was easier.

At the same time he was not unsympathetic nor ignorant of mitigating circumstances that might delay progress. His work at Columbia spanned the great depression and the second world war. He did not know that the last word of my first seminar report coincided with my last nickel, but his notes show continuing thought for students who might have to borrow money, for a young woman with a sick child and a husband in the army, for the demands made upon an only child with ailing parents, for the anxieties of a new father, for a black student whose intelligence and very real ability might not be recognized, for the future of a badly wounded war veteran. Of the last, his note reads: "I must do all I can to help this man." Some students,

but not all, found the “warm human being” behind the reticence, beyond the distance he quite rightly maintained.

He did nothing to curry the students’ favor or to exact applause in a classroom. Just when he came to the conclusion that literary history might be dull, I do not know. In 1950 he succinctly gave his reasons: “A literature was not a unit. All its particles were mutually repellent.” That there could be a unifying idea was an illusion, for a thesis “distorted as much as it unified.” He resorted to no tricks to make his large lecture courses entertaining; he concentrated on making them thoroughly informative. At first he wrote out his lectures; he was later lecturing without notes. The lectures were “talked, in stately, flawless sentences and paragraphs.” He catered to no fashion, followed no trend, and eschewed the affectations that make for instant popularity. He had no eccentricities of manner. It goes without saying that he did not exaggerate.

Not many students credited him with humor, perhaps because he was inclined to understatement. He handled lapses of taste with expressionless irony. Liable to falling into slanginess, I simply did not recognize his oblique objection until later I saw the fault for myself and recalled with chagrin what he’d said. Another student treasures the criticism: “I think this will do—when you have cooled it off a bit.” To cool a student’s enthusiasm for Melville’s “thought,” he said: “Melville always dives deep but he never comes up with anything.” He could respond to a feeble pun by pretending not to get it, but he liked, I think, appropriate levity and genuine wit.

With gifts and virtues, some recognized only in retrospect, Professor Rusk, however “hard to know,” had his students’s respect if not always their affection. Perhaps Rusk is best understood by a sentence of his own that two correspondents recalled to me. In his preface to the *Life* of Emerson, he puts “a high value on Emerson as an individualist struggling, though never with entire success, to keep his little area of personal freedom safe from encroachment.” The complement to this idea is recoverable from his 1950 review of Spiller and Thorpe (italics mine): “One is relieved to discover that editorial authority has not subdued the contributors to a dead level, for *it would be unthinkable to set unity of tone above integrity of persons.*” Holding this Kantean principle, the teacher would respect the integrity of his students, and the scholar would direct his work toward biography.

The change of direction from *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier* to *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* did not occur at once. Between 1925 and 1928 he ventured into another desert, that of colonial poetry. What he thought of what he found there is inferrable from his



1930 review of Ola Winslow's *American Broadside Verse* and Oscar Wegelin's *Early American Poetry* (Second Edition). Too temperate and too sensible to inflate the literary value of colonial poetry, Rusk could find in this verse and doggerel "some interesting reflections of the men and manners of an earlier day," some humor largely unconscious, some useful matter for the student of dialects, and some "robust realism." The reviews show his familiarity with the primary materials; and Columbia now possesses his collection of photostats and notes, the record of his exploration of newspapers and rare books. What he might have done with them is unknown, but he used them in a seminar in colonial literature, as the MSS of M.A. papers show.

There are conflicting stories about what led him to Emerson letters, but I think he always preferred to learn from primary sources. Commenting on a book by a well-known popularizer of American subjects, Rusk describes the author as diligent enough to "wade through the froth and scum, even within limits, generally, of secondary sources." In the few reviews he wrote, polite as they are, he shows little liking for works at third hand or works that presumptuously dragged their subjects out of their own time into the twentieth century. It is only by digging into the documents contemporary with one's subject that a scholar can "make his reader live for the moment wholly in the past." There can be no surer way of getting into the past than by reading another man's mail.

Letters lead to biography; from letters even more than from journals, comes the "sense of constant movement and the coexistent life of body and mind." The phrase is of 1950, but I think it is not the expression of after-the-fact discovery so much as of a long-continued inclination to tell a story. In 1923 he had done his best to shape the skimpy facts of Imlay's "Adventures" into a *Life*. The phrase itself is used in a sentence that diminishes gratitude for criticism wherever it may "weaken" that sense of movement. Rusk's professional life lay between the *Cambridge History* of Trent, Erskine, and Van Doren and the *Literary History* of Spiller and Thorpe; the whole review of the letter is written from Rusk's sense of change. And at its close he yields to the temptation of playing "the...perilous game of guessing" what the next such compilation will be like. He foresees that the study of literature will come to ignore all national boundaries. The one-time teacher of geography finds the appropriate metaphor: "In literary geography, one needs to remember, there is no Mississippi or Amazon whose course lies wholly within the boundaries of one country and no Hudson that belongs entirely to one state." Yet the concluding consultation with the crystal ball turns as if by compulsion toward

biography [italics mine]: "...readers will care little about what quarter of the world an idea comes from, but *much about the roots of personality out of which it grows* and much about its validity and about the excellence of the art that can give it new and beautiful life." To the question that follows and ends the review—"Or is this last only wishful guessing?"—the answer in 1979 appears to be "Yes." The oddity is that he had said in the same review: "The cobwebs of pedantry, just being cleared away from literary history, begin to appear again in criticism."

I do not mean to imply that Rusk came to biography because he could not help it. A man so little impulsive and so given to careful planning does not drift with his inclinations. He wrote the biography when he was ready to write it, well-prepared by the close work on the *Letters*. He had thought out carefully his editorial plans by 8 October 1929, begun his work, and was already in touch with Emerson's grandson Edward Waldo Forbes.<sup>5</sup> On 8 October he wrote Ashley Thorndike a long account of what he proposed to do. He wanted to put his relation to Forbes on a sound footing, and believed that Forbes would welcome assurance of his "honorable intentions and...willingness to do a thorough and scholarly job of editing." He suggests as intermediary Bliss Perry. Thorndike promptly reported to Professor Perry: "I am writing to you to say that Rusk is an A-No. 1 man and could be trusted with anything."

To someone who remembers Mr. Forbes as the kindest and gentlest of men whose own brother called him a "saint," Rusk's approach seems over-cautious, but it was wise. The greater part of the important work that had used the family papers had been done by members of the family or close friends of Emerson himself. Rusk was the first outsider to see the rich collection of Emerson papers then not housed in Houghton Library. All Emerson scholars have reason to be grateful that Rusk was careful, that he was a man who "could be trusted with anything."<sup>6</sup>

We can be grateful too, that he was an "A-No. 1" scholar. The extraordinary notes he took provide a descriptive index to all the papers, its usefulness diminished only by such rearrangement of the papers as the Houghton Library had to make to insure their preservation and to organize them in a way to make them retrievable. (The quantity of the papers is suggested by the fact that they are not yet entirely catalogued.) Rusk's notes are dated and annotated to show whether he used the material while it was still in the Emerson house or after it came to Harvard. The manuscripts are described in sufficient detail to allow them to be recognized. And every note has been carefully checked, each line of quoted matter marked. The notes include a complete index to the

centenary edition of the *Works* and to the *Journals* as edited by Edward Emerson. Since the editors of *JMN* give MS pages, Rusk's notes from the MS journals provide an index to *JMN* as well.

Rusk looked at everything, and there was little he did not read. If he did not read through a manuscript, the note card says so and says why. It would be possible, if anyone cared to do so, to determine what—with the biography in mind—Rusk chose to ignore and what he chose to attend to. When the effort is to cope with abstract ideas, the note-taking is dutiful only and so perfunctory, part of the job, but not the most grateful part. The likes and dislikes show up more comically in his record of letters to Emerson. I suspect Aunt Mary tried his patience before she became rather more than Emerson himself could take. Aunt Mary's handwriting and incoherence extend a double invitation to close one's eyes. In the *Life*, Rusk tends to minimize her influence upon her nephews, reading backwards, so to speak. It seems not to have occurred to him that she might have had a certain nuisance value in provoking her nephew to defend such favorites as Hume and Coleridge. Emerson wearied of Thoreau's contradictory nature too, but this relation is not diminished. Lesser lights grow dim to the notetaker. Anyone who turns to the originals sees why; Emerson attracted a number of tiresome correspondents.

The scholarly editor shows up when Rusk studies a letter for evidence that Emerson has written one; his cautious "Probable letter, but there is no proof" appears on a number of them. This kind of caution insures that there are relatively few mistakes in *The Letters* except those of the kind impossible to avoid; only new material corrects them. The logic, on the evidence, cannot be faulted. Listing letters from catalogues Rusk cannot avoid repeating their errors; he corrects all he can. The only avoidable errors—and these are few—arise from his using Cabot's chronological list of the letters that came his way. This list happens to be less accurate and less informative than the original list made as the letters came in. Ghosts crept into the chronological list and reappear in *The Letters*. Rusk's decision (made at the start) not to reprint letters already in print but only to provide a guide to them can be questioned because so many of them appear in ephemeral publications, some so ephemeral that he did not find them, but he had his reason. He wished to hold strictly to holograph texts. He could not quite keep to that part of the resolve; certain copies by Cabot or Ellen Emerson being in their matter of sufficient importance to persuade him to weaken. Fault-finding aside, texts, notes, and index are models for editors—models unfortunately not always followed. The texts are not only correct and readable as they, first of all, should be,

but the notes and index make them continuously usable for scholars with their own questions about Emerson or any of his friends and correspondents. *The Letters* are a major achievement and that they were printed before the *Life* is all to the good.

Of the prize-winning *Life*, reviewers have spoken with eloquence, and even reviewers who had honest objections found too much to admire to indulge in their complaints. The few who thought carping was their job are negligible; and the arrogant young will no doubt mend their manners along with their ignorance. The deserved praise need not be repeated, but only someone who has made constant use of the book can testify to how many questions are answered there. Having ruined a presentation copy by constant handling, I am a good witness. I needed to know precisely when the Emersons moved to Roxbury; I found in Rusk: "It could hardly have been any lack of financial prosperity in the school that determined the family to leave Federal Street and Boston on May 24, 1823, one day before Waldo's twentieth birthday." Turning to the biography of another literary figure because I needed to know precisely when this gentleman left his midwestern residence to return east, I found to my frustration that he left "before the frost was barely out of the ground." The specificity of Rusk's book remarkably does not impede the movement; at the same time precision keeps the style from being merely pleasing to the ear. What gets said is neither trivial nor useless, sentimental nor vague. The lazy reader is not allowed to indulge himself. To give so much sheer fact without building a rocky road is not so easy as Rusk makes it look.

Such was Rusk's reputation that not long after the *Letters* were published and well before the *Life* was written, he had inquiries from two university presses and two well-known commercial publishers as well as others less well-known. Incentives would probably be welcome even to so determined a man as Rusk. His original version of the book was apparently longer, but I think not so much was sacrificed for publication as is sometimes said. The compression of the notes and the incorporation of the bibliographical apparatus into the index certainly saved a great deal of space, not to mention that the method allows a text unpeppered with superior numbers.<sup>7</sup> The method takes some getting used to, but it works easily enough. From the note-card files it is possible to get a notion of how much of the text was cut. Rusk marked material used in the *Life*, once in pencil and again in red crayon. The pencilled notes identify the chapters in which the matter was used in the first version; the red crayon entries, the chapters in the second version. I have not made a systematic study of all the cards, but have observed that the many notes I have noticed show a difference of two

chapters only. How much cutting of paragraphs, phrases, and words he made there is no way to tell, but, as we all know, such pruning makes a better text. Whatever loss he may have regretted, the book as revised was probably the better candidate for the National Book Award it received.

A prize-winner, Rusk was for a brief time a celebrity and for all time a scholar whose work no student can afford to ignore. Yet while he was deep in the proofreading in the Fall of 1948, the invitation came from the University of Heidelberg. Rusk's letter to the Columbia chairman is characteristically restrained and fully informative, but it points in a new direction. He had, as always, a plan, this time to turn his courses in the direction of comparative literature. In the record from Imlay to Emerson, I see a paradoxically controlled inclination to break down fences. Though certainly in no hurry to do so and making his choices according to his own light, not scrambling to follow a fashion, he seemed while he completed one move to have his eye on the next. I think that secret project had been in the offing for a long time.

On his return from Heidelberg in 1951, he was a few years away from retirement. The rumor was that Rusk had "mellowed," and had even become unpredictable. Perhaps he had, but changes were altering the character of the graduate school and altering noticeably the conception of the dissertation which, with publication no longer required, need no longer be a "contribution to knowledge." Students came under the guidance of a committee; fewer examiners were summoned for the defense. And the number of graduate students had grown beyond the capacity of any English department to maintain the earlier standards. There were jobs waiting in the fifties; the dissertation became a union card. When I lamented lapsing standards, Rusk wrote: "I agree with you." His retirement in 1954 came just in time, I think. What he exemplified in his own work and what he taught and taught well was no longer required.

Retirement was no doubt welcome to him, though no one could imagine him idle. He had accumulated more Emerson letters. There was talk of a seventh volume, but in 1959 he turned over to me the new letters and all his files. He carefully superintended the moving and stacking of them for their transportation from Riverside to Morningside Drive. There was something else he wanted to do. I summoned the nerve to ask, but, smiling, he kept his secret and his area of freedom. The accumulated facts left Riverside Drive to make room for fiction—ungessed at and unrevealed. He was, after all, still a hard man to know, but always a man to admire. The recurring word in letters from relatives and former students is the word "integrity." His contribution

to our knowledge of American Literature is undeniable. He was indeed an "A-No. 1 man" to be "trusted with anything."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Fern Rusk Shapley's account of her father is on deposit at the Jay B. Hubbell Center for American Literary Historiography, Duke University.

For this account of Ralph L. Rusk, I owe my thanks to his family and his former students. His sisters, Fern Rusk Shapley, Zay Rusk Sullens, Edna Rusk Dalton, and Ruth Rusk Curry provided me with their recollections. Mrs. Shapley in particular sent me the night-letter and the letter of 1912 and gave an account of her father and biographical notes on her older brothers and her sisters. Rusk's nephews Mr. Fred Rusk and William E. Sullens, M.D., and his niece Elizabeth Rusk, Ph.D. also provided recollections. Both Dr. Sullens and Elizabeth Rusk worked for their uncle. It goes without saying that I owe a great deal to Rusk's wife Clara Gibbs Rusk and to his daughter Margaret Ann White. Mrs. White's essay on her father is with the accompanying documents.

Jay B. Hubbell recalled his first meeting with Rusk at Columbia in 1914-1915 and their work as editors of *American Literature*. Emery Neff and James L. Clifford spoke as former colleagues, and Lewis Leary in the double capacity of former student and colleague.

In addition to Professor Leary, the following former students kindly replied to my letter of inquiry: Joy Bayless, Mary Elizabeth Burtis, Herbert Brown, Mary Sue Carlock, George A. Cook, Thomas Giddings, Clarence L. Gohdes, Stephen J. Haselton, John A. Kouwenhoven, Patrick F. Quinn, William Randel, Lyon N. Richardson, and Joseph Slater. My sparse quotation from these letters gives no indication of their great value to me.

For documents, I have drawn upon the files of the Columbia English Department, from material in the Columbiana Room with the welcome help of the Curator Paul R. Palmer, from Rusk's own MS records and his letters to me, from the files of notes for his work on Emerson, and from his publications.

*Editor's note:* *UMSE* expresses gratitude to Professor Tilton, to the Jay B. Hubbell Center for American Literary Historiography, Duke University, and to Professor Joel Myerson (for calling attention to Professor Tilton's essay).

<sup>2</sup>Rusk gives only surnames—Graves, Smith, and Wright—in his letter, but from the clues of his details, two of them are readily identifiable. Graves had to be Frank Pierrepont Graves who had already served as president of two western state universities (Wyoming and Washington) and had taught at the University of Missouri in 1904-1907. It must have been between 1904-1907 that he gave an address for graduation at the Windsor High School;

**Eleanor M. Tilton**

25

Rusk recalls the address in his letter. He was at Columbia in 1911-1912 to take a Ph.D. in Education. He would become New York State Commissioner of Education in 1921. (The only other Graves in the Columbia Faculty and Student directory of 1911-1912 is a woman.) Dr. Wright "my teacher and friend" has to be Ernest Hunter Wright, an instructor then beginning his long career at Columbia. Smith is less certain, but eliminating women, pharmacy, medical, and law students (and my own high school geometry teacher) leaves among the few possibilities Robert Metcalf Smith, later Professor of English at Lehigh. In the letter Smith is described as holding a graduate fellowship in English; Robert Metcalf Smith did hold a fellowship in 1911-1912.

<sup>3</sup>William Cameron Forbes was governor-general from 11 November 1909 to 12 August 1913.

<sup>4</sup>His letters to me confirm this judgment; in one he writes: "I am pleased, of course, because you give your book on Holmes so important a place." One of Rusk's former students had the impression that Rusk was disappointed in him because he was content outside that "circle."

<sup>5</sup>For Forbes, see *Edward Waldo Forbes, Yankee Visionary*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1971. Forbes was director of the Museum from 1909-1944, serving also as Lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts.

<sup>6</sup>That through the devotion of the Emerson family, so much was preserved does not diminish our debt to Rusk.

<sup>7</sup>That the method was invented late is clear from a letter to me of 9 November 1948. He writes that the book is about two-thirds in galley, but the notes, to come at the end of the book, are still to be condensed and put into final form."