

1939

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Recommended Citation

Wilgus, A. Curtis (1939) "James Alexander Robertson," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 18 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol18/iss1/3>

JAMES ALEXANDER ROBERTSON
By A. CURTIS WILGUS

Few scholars have had such an extensive general understanding of, or such an intensive interest in certain fields of history as had Dr. Robertson. The Philippines, Latin America, Florida, and Maryland all attracted his earnest, enthusiastic, and scholarly attention; and in each of those fields the results of his labors are outstanding. Though honors came to him from four continents, those who knew him best remember the man before the scholar.

James Alexander Robertson was born on August 19, 1873 in Corry, Pennsylvania, of Canadian and Scotch parents. When he was ten the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he remained until he was twenty-eight years old. At Western Reserve University he majored in Old French and other Romance languages, and in 1896 received the Ph. B. degree.

Upon leaving college he was employed to read proof on the notable *The Jesuit Relations* then being compiled and edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites, with the assistance of Emma Helen Blair. When this task was completed Dr. Robertson prepared the index for the work as volumes seventy-two and seventy-three (Cleveland, 1901).

From Cleveland he went to Madison, Wisconsin, where he collaborated with Miss Blair, who had been engaged in historical work for many years, in compiling and editing *The Philippine Islands* (55 vols., Cleveland, 1903-1909). As this work grew, its scope was considerably widened and Dr. Robertson found it necessary to visit the archives of Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, and England to collect copies of original documents. He was occupied with this research from 1902-1907.

Meanwhile in 1906 Western Reserve University had honored the young scholar, then thirty-three years of age, with the L.H.D. degree in recognition of his outstanding work in the field of letters. Such early recognition seldom comes to any one.

During these busy years Dr. Robertson found time to edit *Magellan's Voyage around the world by Antonio Pigafetta* (2 vols. Cleveland 1906) and Morga's account of the Philippine Islands (2 vols. Cleveland, 1907); and he prepared a *Bibliography of the Philippine Islands* (Cleveland, 1908).

In 1909, with work completed on the *Philippine Islands*, he went to Washington to join the Historical Research Department of the Carnegie Institution. The first product of this activity was the *List of documents in the Spanish Archives relating to the history of the United States, which have been printed or of which transcripts have been preserved in American libraries* (Washington, 1910). This was followed by his *Louisiana under the rule of Spain, France and the United States, 1785-1807. . .* (2 vols. Cleveland, 1911).

His fame had by now spread widely, and in 1910 he was invited to Manila to become the first librarian of the Philippine Library. He remained there five years building up the collections and spending some of his time in writing, compiling, and editing.

Two years after going to Manila, on March 4, 1912, Dr. Robertson married Miss Cora Moore Halsey, of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. The wedding took place in Hongkong, China, with little ceremony and with no music save his own humming of the wedding march from Lohengrin. Returning to Manila he was soon sent to Spain to purchase a collection of documents of the General Philippine Tobacco

Company, which he succeeded in doing in 1913 for the sum of \$100,000.

On all occasions when in Spain he engaged in his favorite occupation of collecting Philippine publications for his personal library, and at the time of his death this material constituted doubtless the most valuable private collection of such items in existence.

In 1916 Dr. and Mrs. Robertson and their young daughter returned to Washington, where he resumed his work with the Carnegie Institution. But the next year he was appointed Chief of the Research Division (and later of the Near Eastern Division) of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. This position he held until 1923.

Meanwhile, in 1918, he had become managing editor of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, which position he held until his death. This task, which he loved so well, necessitated his making contacts with people everywhere interested in Latin American civilization; and through these relationships Dr. Robertson exercised an unmeasured influence on the studying and teaching of Latin American affairs in colleges and universities in this country, and on the research for and the writing of scholarly monographs in that field.

It was in 1923 that Dr. Robertson began work on his unsurpassed contribution to the writing of Florida's history. Mr. John B. Stetson Jr. had established the Florida State Historical Society for the purpose of assisting in the writing of, and the publishing and distributing of a series of volumes relating to the state. This organization had no connection with the Florida Historical Society, but Dr. Robertson was a director of the latter, their membership was largely common, and there was always

full cooperation between them. Only two volumes had appeared when Mr. Stetson brought Dr. Robertson into association with the project and he became executive secretary of that Society and editor of all of its publications. These were:

Pedro Menendez de Aviles . . . from the Spanish of Gonzalo Solis de Meras, Translated and edited by Jennette Thurber Connor (1923).

A History of Florida . . . by Caroline Mays Brevard, edited by James Alexander Robertson (2 vols. 1924, 1925).

Colonial Records of Spanish Florida, translated and edited by Jennette Thurber Connor (2 vols. 1925, 1930).

Territorial Florida Journalism by James Owen Knauss (1926).

Jean Ribaut . . . by Jennette Thurber Connor (1927).

The Luna Papers, translated and edited by Herbert Ingram Priestley (2 vols. 1928).

Loyalists in East Florida, 1777-1785, by Wilbur Henry Siebert (2 vols. 1929).

Commercial Policy of Spain in the Floridas. Translated and edited by Arthur Preston Whitaker (1931).

True Relation . . . by a Gentleman of Elvas, translated and edited by James Alexander Robertson (2 vols. 1932, 1933).

During the ten years in which he was supervising and editing this series of volumes on Florida Dr. Robertson was collecting material for a bibliography of Florida for the period 1526 to 1821, and for a check-list of Florida books and pamphlets issued since 1821. He also prepared for the press a history of the flags of Florida with colored illu-

strations and historical accounts (unpublished); Letters, reports and other manuscript materials relating to Juan Ponce de Leon (unpublished) ; Letters, reports and other manuscript materials relating to Pedro Menendez de Aviles to be issued in three volumes (unpublished) ; a twenty volume series on the legislative and other records of British West Florida (unpublished) ; and a facsimile of a book of watercolors of early Florida by the artist Jacques le Moyne (in press).

During the late depression the Florida State Historical Society suffered financially and much of the work which Dr. Robertson had prepared and planned could no longer be supported by Mr. John B. Stetson Jr., so Dr. Robertson found it necessary to turn to other work. It was at this time that he began to prepare for the Council of Learned Societies a treatise to be in two or three volumes on Philippine Customary Law.

But in 1935 he was offered the position of Archivist of the State of Maryland, and moving to Annapolis, with his customary vigor he organized the state archives and began the collection and preservation of invaluable local material. He was happy in this task, and his new interests led to his election in 1938 as vice-president of the Society of American Archivists.

Dr. Robertson's manifold interests led him into many organizations and brought him many honors. In 1931 he was instrumental in organizing the Inter-American Bibliographical Association (now the Inter-American Bibliographical and Library Association), and he became its first president. In recognition of his bibliographical interest he was made a member of the Bibliographical Advisory Committee of the Governing Board of the Pan

American Union. His interest in Philippine affairs led to his being appointed Chancellor Emeritus of the Philippine Academy, and to his election as member of the Spanish Academy of History. His Latin American interests led to his appointment to the Executive Committee of the Instituto Panamericana de Geografia e Historia, and to his election as corresponding member of the Hispanic Society of America. He was elected also a member of historical societies in Asia, Europe, and Latin America, a list of which fills many lines in *Who's Who in America*.

As a result of his enthusiastic interests in Florida's history and for his invaluable contributions in that field, Dr. Robertson was awarded, on April 26, 1936, the Cervantes medal by the Florida branch of the Instituto de las Espanas. At the time of the award the committee stated that "Dr. Robertson has done more to promote the ideals of Spanish civilization in Florida than any other person. His eminent services have been so varied and of such a high quality that we believe the award of this medal to him . . . will set the highest possible standard for subsequent awards, and not only stimulate new interest in our work but connect more closely the interests of Spain in Florida with the National Instituto de las Espanas and organizations of similar purpose and achievement."

In 1927 Dr. Robertson became general editor of a series of translations of national history texts used in Latin American Universities which is now being published by the University of North Carolina Press and which is known as the "Inter-American Historical Series." At the time of his death two volumes had been printed and two were in press.

Besides receiving the Cervantes medal Dr. Robertson was awarded a gold medal by the United States

government at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904, and a medal by the Exposition Committee at the Philippine Exposition in 1915.

To know Dr. Robertson was to love him. Probably no man in the scholarly world of his time had more or firmer friends, and certainly no friend had a more understanding acquaintance than Dr. Robertson. Although he was never long connected as a teacher with any university, hundreds of students throughout this country, setting out on their paths to scholarly attainment, consulted with him directly or by correspondence; while scholars everywhere sought his advice and inspiration. To many individuals he was a father confessor, ready with impartial advice, praising without flattering, criticizing without hurting; and pursuing the even tenor of his way infected everyone by his unbounded enthusiasm. The scores of scholars who visited his home or his office were made to feel that his chief interest at the moment was in their work. He met strangers so easily and put them at ease so simply that visitors looked forward to meeting him. In conversation he often told anecdotes and illustrated his point from his vast fund of knowledge, ranging especially through art and literature. His enthusiasm for his own work was contagious. No one, whether layman or specialist, came into his presence without in some degree sharing his interest in the many fields of his learning.

Dr. Robertson considered his work the greatest fun in the world, and he played at his innumerable tasks with zest, devotion, and seemingly little fatigue. Until the very last, he did the work of several men. Yet he was troubled throughout his life with myopia which prevented his driving a car, from rec-

ognizing people across a room, and necessitated the placing of reading matter within a few inches of his eyes. But even with this handicap he was able to read almost everything in his field and to scan thousands of books, many of a popular nature.

At home he had many interests, especially his grounds and his garden, and these contributed to the robust health which was his until a heart ailment suddenly overcame him.

Dr. Robertson died on the twentieth of last March, almost in the midst of his labors-in harness, as he had wished to die. His knowledge and his presence are equally missed. He was a true scholar, a sincere gentleman, and a loyal friend.