



# Ralph Willard Hidy

1905–1977

RALPH WILLARD HIDY was a scholar who brought high standards, a probing intellect, and a gentle spirit to our profession. He was understanding of others' mistakes and modest about his own contributions. As one who worked closely with him for over a decade in a variety of relationships, I have seen repeated examples of his dedication, his thoroughness as a scholar, and his desire to help others. It is my honor to speak for all the others who benefited as I have from knowing and working with Ralph, and I have called on them to assist in this tribute to a departed friend and colleague.

Ralph was born on a farm near Portland, Indiana, April 21, 1905. The eldest of the four children of Urban and Helen (Willard) Hidy, he grew up on the ancestral farm near Jeffersonville, Fayette County, Ohio. He never forgot this heritage. His experience close to the soil on that Ohio farm heightened his appreciation of hard work, his lack of pretentiousness, and indeed his desire to understand the corporate business revolution that changed the face of rural America.

His boyhood home was not far from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, where he became a major in English and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Graduating in 1926, he taught history at the Portsmouth, Ohio, high school for a year before going East for graduate work at Clark University. After receiving his M.A. in 1928, he married a fellow student, Muriel Wagenhauser. For the rest of his life she was not only a helpmate, wife, and mother, but a colleague and scholarly partner. For two years they lived in Northfield, Vermont, where he taught at Norwich University. In 1930 they moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ralph became a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard under that great gentleman and scholar, Frederick Merk.

The Hidys were appointed in the early 1930s to the faculty of Wheaton College – Ralph in history and Muriel in economics. Each earned a doctorate. Muriel chose George Peabody, the investment banker, as a subject for research in order to have a comparable study to Ralph's on the great English banking house of Baring. Ralph received his doctorate in 1935, and until the outbreak of World War

II the Hidys led a happy, productive life in the quiet college town of Norton, Massachusetts, spending their summers on research which took them to Canada and England.

Henrietta C. Jennings, Professor of Economics, Emerita, at Wheaton recalls: "Ralph had a deep interest in, and influence upon, the students both intellectually and in their extracurricular affairs, giving generously of his time. . . . Highly regarded for his common sense and sound judgment as well as for his scholarship, he made important contributions to the deliberations of the faculty and to the intellectual life of the community." Ernest J. Knapton, Professor of History, Emeritus, at Wheaton writes: "It may surprise some to know that in addition to the inevitable burdens of committee work Ralph demonstrated genuine talent as an actor in a number of school plays." But more important: "The young man from the Middle West who rose to the pinnacle of his profession thoroughly deserved all the honors which he won."

Deeply concerned by the outbreak of World War II and foreseeing its spread, Ralph applied for a commission in the Navy. He went on active duty as a lieutenant in the summer of 1941 and was assigned to 150 Causeway St., Boston, the so-called U.S.S. *Concrete*. From there he covered New England for Navy Intelligence until 1946, rising to the rank of commander. He later said that being the second ranking officer in a large organization taught him much about administration.

The Hidys, now with a baby, Ann Helen, taught at Wheaton again from February 1946 to June 1947. Meantime, their connection with the business history group at Harvard had led to their being asked to write the crucial first volume of a history of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) under the auspices of the Business History Foundation, Inc., of which Professor N.S.B. Gras was president.

Ralph's connection with the Harvard group had come about through Agnes Larson, also a student of Professor Merk. Her sister, Henrietta Larson, worked closely with Professor Gras, who was the first Isidor Straus Professor of Business History at Harvard. Both Ralph and Muriel established a close relationship with the business history group, attending its meetings, luncheons, and discussions. Henrietta Larson remembers that Ralph regularly attended Professor Gras' course in 1938. Furthermore, as she recalls it, "Ralph was the only student with a Ph.D. from across the River who took so serious an interest in what we were doing." As time passed and Ralph Hower, a promising young member of the group, developed

an interest in the School's work in human relations, Professor Gras, according to Professor Larson, began to regard Ralph Hidy as a possible member of the business history group and in time as his successor. Gras was deeply disappointed in Ralph Hidy's decision to volunteer for the Navy; he considered it an unfortunate interruption in the building of Ralph's career in history. Indeed, it meant an interruption of almost five years.

When Professors Gras and Larson were planning the Standard Oil project soon after the war, the only authors they considered for the first volume were Ralph and Muriel Hidy. That volume, of course, was crucial in setting the tone and acceptability of those that were to follow. In Professor Larson's words, "I knew the quality of their work, their sense of responsibility; and I believed we had to have someone who had some familiarity with business history and also a broad base in American history in general."

Resigning from Wheaton, the Hidys moved to Forest Hills, New York, and devoted full time to research on the Jersey Standard project for the next three years. In 1950 Ralph was appointed Professor of History at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of New York University and also joined the University's Business School faculty. This appointment followed by one year the publication of his *The House of Baring in American Trade and Finance*. Over the next several years he and Muriel completed the first volume of the *History of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)*, which appeared in 1955 under the subtitle, *Pioneering in Big Business, 1882-1911*. Ralph spent a substantial amount of time on that book after his three-year full-time stint was completed. For several years the manuscript occupied his summers and such other time as he could spare from a busy schedule of teaching and editing the Business History series of the N.Y.U. Press. But the result was a thorough job that set the desired tone for the Jersey Standard series. In the words of Professor Larson, who was in charge of the project in New York: "I cannot too strongly stress my own conclusion that Ralph and Muriel played a key role in the success of the Jersey project."

At New York University Ralph had succeeded the distinguished scholar, Thomas C. Cochran. The two had first met at Princeton in 1941 at the first annual meeting of the Economic History Association, where Ralph gave a paper on "The Organization and Functions of Anglo-American Merchant Bankers, 1815-1860." Professor Cochran writes: "From then on we kept in quite close touch, and when I left N.Y.U. I had no thought of anyone but Ralph to succeed me."

Later, Ralph became the long-time Secretary and served a term as President of the Economic History Association.

Ralph's qualities as a person, teacher and scholar are reflected in the words of one of his N.Y.U. students, Marvin Pitterman, later of the University of Rhode Island: "I learned to be a better scholar and most certainly a better teacher from his painstaking guidance. . . . From the first day I met him at New York University . . . I knew here was a rare personality." Another former N.Y.U. student, W. H. Ruenheck, who became head of the History Department at the Air Force Academy, put the same thought a little differently: "The main thing I will remember about Ralph Hidy, in addition to the help he gave me in completing my dissertation, is the fact that he was one of the most down-to-earth, sincere academicians I have ever met." Vincent Carosso, brought to N.Y.U. by Ralph in 1954, writes: "Ralph was one of the important builders of the N.Y.U. history department. He brought it distinction by what he did and what he stood for."

In 1957 Ralph was invited to become the Isidor Straus Professor of Business History at Harvard. Ill health had plagued Professor Gras before his retirement, and for a period of several years the future of business history at its American birthplace was in question. Professor Larson, George Gibb, and a young English scholar, Barry Supple, held the group together pending a faculty vote to support business history and to seek a successor to Professor Gras. That search ended with Ralph.

Where Professor Pitterman saw a "rare personality," Professor Larson saw a "rare type of scholar . . . one dedicated to the work and the progress of the field and without any drive to promote himself." In Professor Thomas Cochran's words, "He was one of the important scholars in trying to keep business and economic history literate, qualitative disciplines during twenty years of onslaught by quantifiers and theorists."

When Ralph assumed the Straus Professorship in the fall of 1957, he was familiar with developments of almost thirty years that had threatened the future of business history. One of his most important goals was to heal the breach that had developed between followers of Dr. Arthur H. Cole and those who had followed Professor Gras into what some considered a relatively narrow approach to business history.

During the depressed 1930s, Professor Gras of necessity had turned increasingly to company history, which was in some measure

self-supporting. Since he had been asked to teach administration by the case method, which was a unique application of history, his approach was different from that advocated by Dr. Cole, the librarian of the Business School and a student of Edwin Gay. A major figure in the Economic History Association, Dr. Cole had become intrigued with entrepreneurial history. In 1947 he obtained a Rockefeller Foundation grant that would fund a Research Center for Entrepreneurial History at Harvard over the next decade. Meanwhile, a deep personal and professional gap had developed between Cole and Gras. In his new post, Ralph had to face, and was determined to bridge, this chasm. The time was propitious since the Center had completed its pioneering work and was closed. Dr. Fritz Redlich, who had been associated with Dr. Cole throughout the life of the Center and was a close friend of the Hidys, provided a major personal link between business history and entrepreneurial history.

Although Ralph had done his major writing in company history, his perspective was broader. Initiating a search for a new member for the group, he emphasized government-business relations as a desired specialty. It was my good fortune to be chosen for this post in the spring of 1958. My dissertation had been awarded the American Historical Association's Beveridge Prize for 1954, and as a member of that Committee Ralph was asked to assist me in revising my manuscript for publication. It was in this connection that I first learned of his passion for detail and accuracy, his unflinching willingness to help a young scholar, and his selfless dedication to seeing that any manuscript for which he was even partially responsible should be as good as he could possibly make it. Our correspondence at that time virtually equalled in length the manuscript itself.

One of Ralph's first steps as Straus Professor was to renew a series of dinner meetings of the Friends of Business and Economic History, to which those interested in economic, business, and entrepreneurial history were invited. Dr. Cole attended regularly, and a cordial working relationship developed between him and the business history group.

In the fall of 1958 Ralph proposed that we hold a conference to assess the state of business history. I can well recall the planning session in the Faculty Club, where Barry Supple and I argued that we should make it a large conference and not a select gathering. Ralph, who always carefully examined all sides of any question before making a decision, accepted that recommendation, and we



held a successful conference. On that occasion Ralph and Muriel entertained the entire group of some 80 people at a supper party in their Belmont home. Other conferences followed, and through them emerged new, broader definitions of what business history embraced. As Harold F. Williamson points out: "He [Ralph] deserves special credit for sponsoring the two meetings at the Harvard Business School in 1958 and 1961 which did so much to show that as a discipline separate from economic history, business history is much more comprehensive than company history, with which it was frequently identified."

This new approach was reflected in the *Business History Review*, for which Ralph was responsible. Under his leadership and under a series of capable editors, including George S. Gibb, Ralph Andreano, James Baughman, Glenn Porter, the *Review* attracted excellent contributions and also solicited them for special issues highlighting important areas of a broadly defined field. This service to developing the field has been singled out by Professor Thomas Cochran as one of Ralph's most important contributions.

To demonstrate his interest in a more broadly based business history, Ralph had suggested in 1957 that the Business School support research on a study of Boston capitalists and western railroads. This research, which Barry Supple and I did, was based in large part upon primary sources available in Baker Library, in which Ralph took a special interest. Donald Clark and Laurence Kipp, Dr. Cole's successors, were among Ralph's closest friends at Harvard.

Our book on *Boston Capitalists and Western Railroads* was included in the Harvard Series on Business History, of which Ralph became editor after Henrietta Larson's retirement. Several additional volumes were added to the Harvard Series before Ralph retired, and all received the careful attention to detail that was so characteristic of him.

While still working on the Jersey Standard book, Ralph became associated with Allan Nevins and Frank E. Hill in writing the history of the Weyerhaeuser Company. It appeared in 1963 as *Timber and Men, the Weyerhaeuser Story*. Interest in the forest products industries led him to become a director of the Forest History Society, of which he was also president for a term. In 1972 he was elected a Fellow of that Society in special recognition of his contributions.

Ralph was always alert to opportunities to spread knowledge of and stimulate interest in business history. He was an incorporator

and trustee of the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum and was particularly interested in development of its library for research and its encouragement of publication. From 1961 to his death he was president of the Business History Foundation, Inc., which encourages research and writing in the field. From 1955 to his death he also served as a vice president and director of the Lincoln Educational Foundation, which awards graduate fellowships in American economic and business history. Theodore F. Marburg, who was a member of the Foundation's awards committee, recalls that Ralph gave the same careful attention to manuscripts as Marburg had himself received in connection with a book accepted by the N.Y.U. Press while Ralph was editor of its business history series.

Another unique project to which Ralph gave much time was one to teach high school students basic concepts of economics through the case-study approach used at the Harvard Business School. This project originated in 1962 as the Harvard-Newton Project, at first funded principally by the Exxon Foundation. Employing case studies, some of them rewritten from the School's own business history cases, the approach proved surprisingly successful. It led to the incorporation in 1967 of the Business History and Economic Life Program, of which Ralph became chairman and the president. A variety of projects, some undertaken in connection with Harvard Business School Clubs, were carried on under these auspices and introduced teachers and students to business history in a way they could understand. In 1965 Ralph endorsed the proposal that we employ five high school teachers to write cases. Despite serious concern that this undertaking might fail, it too proved successful. In fact it was so successful that several of the participants terminated their careers as high school teachers and one subsequently became a management consultant! Paul Tedesco, one of those teachers and later coordinator of the program, writes: "Most high school teachers (and others also) will never know how concerned Ralph Hidy was in what they were trying to do with youngsters."

In the late 1950s and 1960s interest in business history was increasing steadily in Japan, and it brought a steady flow of Japanese scholars to the business history group. They were all eager to learn and, despite some language barriers, all apparently profited from their exposure to Ralph and the group. After his retirement from Harvard, Ralph was invited to Japan to meet with members of the Japanese Business History Society, whose genesis and growth owed not a little to its members' experience at the Business School. In the



words of Kishichi Watanabe of Kyoto Sangyo University: "I believe neither Professor Hidy's kindness, virtues and love nor their influence can ever die in our hearts."

For many years there had been a Business History Fellow associated with the business history group. The postdoctoral fellowship attracted many talented young scholars, but it was also an expensive operation for the School to support. Assistance came from the Newcomen Society, which already offered an annual prize for the best article in the *Business History Review* and a similar book award every three years. I recall the day that we met with the Society's president, Charles Penrose, Jr., at the Boston Safe Deposit Bank and had the temerity to suggest that the Newcomen Society establish a postdoctoral fellowship. He accepted the proposal with alacrity.

Among the participants in this fellowship program was Professor Maury Klein of the University of Rhode Island, who recalls: "He [Ralph] was always helpful when needed, never obtrusive when not needed." Professor Kozo Yamamura of the University of Washington, a contemporary of Klein's at the School, writes of Ralph: "I often wished, as I listened to him talk of his research with that gentle twinkle in his eyes, that some day I could do, in my study of Japanese business history, the kind of work he had done. His genuine dedication to his work and his enthusiasm were highly contagious."

Throughout these years Ralph was active in a variety of projects. Along with Edward Bursk and Donald Clark of the School's faculty he was an editor of *The World of Business*, a four-volume library of business literature that appeared in 1962. He presented a paper on "Origins of Big Business in the United States" at the Third International Conference on Economic History at Munich in 1965. He contributed articles quite regularly to the *Business History Review* and other journals, and he wrote the article on "Business History" for the new *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which appeared in 1968. Among other things, he advised Robert Lovett of the Baker Library's Manuscripts Division on acquisitions and in preparing a guide to economic and business history, for which Ralph wrote the introduction.

Meanwhile, of course, he was teaching in the School's various programs. When he arrived, the M.B.A. course still used the Gras and Larson compilation of business history cases. Since that volume was almost twenty years old, a continuing project of the group was

to revise, update, and add to these cases. Ralph aided in this work and enthusiastically shared the teaching load with his junior associates. In addition, he and I, and for a time Barry Supple, conducted a business history seminar primarily for doctoral candidates. Ralph was an excellent teacher and was so meticulous that he always took detailed notes even on informal seminar discussions. It was in the Advanced Management Program, however, that he probably enjoyed himself most. He was very comfortable with the senior executives who took the course and he enjoyed the stimulating interaction with mature, experienced minds. They obviously enjoyed his unpretentious manner and sincere interest in them and their managerial problems. In the words of Professor Kenneth R. Andrews, director of the AMP program at that time: "As a colleague in teaching, I was aware of his regard for students, his high regard for collegueship, and his patience in attempting to persuade future-oriented businessmen of the importance and value of history." Speaking for all who came in contact with Ralph, Professor Andrews also writes: "An indispensable part of Ralph's demeanor was his capacity, without saying very much, to imply friendship and support."

From the mid-1960s on, both Ralph and Muriel were plagued by health problems. Neither allowed these problems to dim their basic optimism or determination to lead as active an intellectual life as possible. Their courage in the face of adversity was a lesson for all who beheld it.

Both were completely dedicated to business history and to their scholarly work. If the Hidys took a "vacation," which was seldom, it was a working vacation. Such dedication did not mean that they were not good companions in a non-professional setting, but it was clear that business history gave their lives meaning and was in the forefront of their concerns in good health and bad. They were in every sense of the word a "team," and there were few decisions, projects, or publications where one did not rely on the other for suggestions, criticism, and assistance.

On retiring from Harvard in 1971, Ralph took much of a semester "off" before devoting himself to his writing. In that time he gave his presidential address at the annual meeting of the Economic History Association, and he delivered a paper on Alexander Brown in Belfast, at a conference concerned with Ulstermen in America. The Hidys also visited Japan. There Ralph attended two professional meetings and conducted a short seminar at the University of Tokyo. Then the Hidys went to the Philippines, where Ralph, with

a young Filipino scholar, introduced Business History in the Asian Institute of Management.

The one great disappointment in a life full of accomplishment was that when Ralph died on December 5, 1977, the history of the Great Northern Railway, on which he had been long engaged, was not completed. It is to be hoped that the co-authors follow his high standards in reaching that goal.

Ralph's last contribution was a bibliographical essay on business history for *Recent Developments in the Study of Business History*, which appeared in 1977 in honor of the memory of Herman E. Krooss. Ralph said to me many times that one's scholarly works are as much one's children as one's own progeny. For all his pride in his daughter, Ann Helen (Mrs. Patrick Scovill), and her accomplishments, Ralph was equally concerned about the inheritance he would pass on to future generations of business historians.

Unquestionably Ralph's major contribution to the literature of business history was the Jersey Standard volume, *Pioneering in Big Business*, written with Muriel as his co-author. Reviewing the book for *The Journal of Economic History* in June 1956, Allan Nevins wrote: "We have here a book, complete, detailed, accurate, and well proportioned, which by its scientific objectivity corrects numerous distortions of previous writers." In these words Nevins captured the essence of Ralph's approach to scholarship. As Professor Norman Crockett of the University of Oklahoma, a former Business History Fellow at Harvard, put it: "Ralph was one of an old line of scholars — a line that I am sorry to see passing from the scene. Ralph, like many others his age, had an interest in scholarship and professionalism which, I am sorry to say, seems to be on the decline."

Ralph had a congenital suspicion of generalization except after the most meticulous and exhaustive research possible into the question at issue. In part this was his nature but in part it was also the result of his training under Professor Merk, who insisted on the very highest standards of scholarship. Herbert Heaton, reviewing *The House of Baring in American Trade and Finance* for *The American Historical Review* in April 1950, noted that the amount of detail in the book almost got in the way. On the other hand, Heaton pointed out, such detail was defensible since it was necessary to explain how and why business policies and decisions were reached.

Research of this type is highly time-consuming, especially in business documents where there is a major challenge of separating the wheat from the chaff in thousands, if not tens of thousands, of

documents. It caused the Jersey Standard volume to take far longer to produce than Professor Gras had planned. But *Pioneering in Big Business* stands as Ralph's major scholarly monument. In the words of Allan Nevins' 1956 review, ". . . as a whole it is one of the most successful and impressive works of business history produced in America or any other country."

The Jersey history represented the Gras approach to business history, with careful company histories eventually providing the building blocks for industry history. This approach first came to partial fruition in 1959 with the publication of a history of the petroleum industry by a team led by Harold F. Williamson. But Professor Williamson, who also had long experience with company history, recognized that there were other approaches to industry history that could be equally illuminating and useful, as well as far less time consuming. By the time that Ralph arrived at the Harvard Business School in 1957 he was ready to explore these approaches and any and all avenues that might give new meaning to business history. This interest was reflected in the conferences and research projects undertaken by the group, and in the pages of the *Business History Review*. However, Ralph himself, though he tried, was never really comfortable with conceptualizing, generalizing, or theorizing in the absence of extensive empirical data. With the enthusiasm of younger scholars for theory and quantitative approaches, Ralph became, as Thomas C. Cochran noted, one of the key defenders of qualitative, literate economic and business history.

It is difficult to do justice to a departed friend and colleague in terms that depict him accurately for those who know him only through his work. Therefore, I have attempted to capture the essence of the man, teacher, and scholar in the words of others who also knew him. Perhaps what we all feel is best expressed by Dean Lawrence E. Fouraker's report to the President of Harvard University on the occasion of Ralph's retirement in 1971:

His own research produced landmark histories of several major corporations, and his unflagging, humane, sincere, and supportive encouragement of countless others fostered broad concern for the very highest standards of scholarship. Professor Hidy's many contributions to a rigorously critical and objective understanding of the societal roles of business are of lasting merit.

Indeed, we have lost a rare personality and a rare type of scholar.

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