



IN MEMORIAM

Joseph Chesley Mathews
Professor of English, Emeritus
Santa Barbara
1906 — 2001

When the writers of this memorial first knew him, Joseph Chesley Mathews — always known as Chesley — was already in the last decade of his teaching career. He was something of a gray eminence, friendly with his colleagues but no longer actively engaged in English departmental matters. We knew him as a dapper and ever-gentle Southern gentleman, going about his teaching, engaged in his research, and deeply devoted to his family. We knew that his scholarly area of expertise was Dante and principally the influence of Dante on American writers. We knew that he had devised a special course of which he was proud, "Dante's Divine Comedy in Translation."

He had been chair of the department for five years in the less contentious early fifties and, since he had joined the department in 1944, he had been active in the transformation of the undergraduate college into a branch of the University of California. The record of his research and teaching, we have since learned, was satisfyingly complete and had brought him a number of honors.

Born in 1906 in Flemington, Florida, Mathews took his bachelor's degree, summa cum laude, at Furman University in three years and was valedictorian of his class. He completed an M.A. at Duke University and a Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1937. There his dissertation, entitled "Dante and Major American Writers, 1800-1867," proved to be the seminal work of his career. In the following year it was awarded the Dante Prize at Harvard and, as matters turned out, his career was marked out for him.

His first regular teaching position was at the University of Texas, where he advanced from instructor to assistant professor before being asked in 1944 to join the faculty of Santa Barbara State College, soon to be developed and re-organized into a campus of the University of California. There Mathews moved up the academic ladder, achieving full professor status in 1958. His full-length tenure as chair (1951-55) and his wide-ranging committee work for the department paved the way for the department's growth and successful recruitment of a cadre of young scholars, poets and critics.

Beyond the department, he served on campus committees for ten years, principally working with those dealing with faculty welfare and undergraduate teaching.

But it is by his lectures and publications that he principally made his personal mark. Having found his special work, he regularly addressed scholarly meetings on aspects of his subject: there were at least five talks at national gatherings of the Modern Language Association and several more at meetings of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast. The talks then were fleshed out into articles and appeared one after another in a number of journals, principally the University of Texas Studies in English, *Italica*, the publication of the Dante Society of America, and the Furman University Research Bulletin Essays. (He also served in several capacities for these organizations: as, for example, board member for the Dante Society, vice-president for the American Association of Teachers of Italian, program director for the PAPC, and officer for the American Literature segment.)

His publication record attests to his wide and persistent research over the years. He read the corpus of nineteenth-century American writers to determine each one's knowledge of or interest in Dante. A first group consisted of Irving, Poe, Bryant, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Emerson, and was followed by a second including Longfellow, Thoreau, Melville, Lowell, and Holmes. He became the authority in the field.

In 1958-1959 he was awarded a Fulbright lectureship to Italy and spent it as visiting professor of American literature at the University of Turin. Shorter Fulbright commitments took him to the Universities of Bologna and Venice, and he lectured as well for the United States Information Service and the Consiglio per gli Studi Americani in Rome and Palermo.

When Professor Ralph L. Rusk, the distinguished Emerson scholar, discovered the latter's translation of Dante's *Vita Nuova*, he invited Chesley Mathews to edit it. Mathews turned to the task and provided some hundred pages of detailed notes for the Emerson manuscript. The Harvard University library, which owned the original, requested that Mathews' edition appear serially in its *Bulletin*. Then it was published in book form by the University of North Carolina Press in 1960.

By 1965, the 700th anniversary of Dante's birth, Mathew's reputation was such that he was invited to speak at several celebrations, to a general UCSB audience for the Committee of Arts and Lectures, in Ravenna on a similar occasion, and most notably in a symposium at the Library of Congress. The proceedings were broadcast and Professor Mathews' lead talk, *The Interest in Dante Shown by Nineteenth-Century Men of Letters*, was published with two others for the Library by the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund.

By 1970 his attention was much taken by Longfellow, and in that year he edited for Transcendental Books in Hartford a volume entitled *Henry W. Longfellow Reconsidered*, a Symposium. He retired from university teaching in 1974 but a 1976 MLA talk, entitled *An Historical Overview of American Writers' Interest in Dante (to about 1900)*, became the lead contribution in a volume on *Dante's Influence on American Writers* (1977).

During his retirement he acted as visiting lecturer at the Longfellow Commemorative Conference in 1982 and at the International Christian University, Tokyo, in 1984.

His work received particular honor in the years of retirement. In 1975 the Order of Merit from the president of the Republic of Italy was bestowed on Professor Mathews, along with the title of "Cavaliere." Finally, at a gala occasion to celebrate his ninetieth birthday, he was awarded an honorary doctorate in humanities by the president of Furman University.

As a graduate student at Berkeley, on July 14, 1932, Chesley Mathews married Pearl Cieri. She survives him now along with their three daughters, Amoretta Hoerber of Potomac, Maryland, Eleanor Woodard of Morganfield, Kentucky, and Barbara Mathews-Zirolli, M.D., of Santa Barbara.

Patrick McCarthy
Robert Erickson