

Richard Herman Wilhelm

January 10, 1909–August 6, 1968

There is ample enduring testimony to Dick Wilhelm's standing within the professional community. He had received three awards from the American Institute of Chemical Engineers: the William H. Walker Award in 1951, the Professional Progress Award in 1952 and the Warren K. Lewis Award in Chemical Engineering Education in 1966. In 1966 he also received the American Chemical Society's award in Industrial and Engineering Chemistry. Just this past April he was named to the National Academy of Engineering. These honors and his legacy of many articles in technical journals will remain to proclaim his prominence in the annals of chemical engineering.

Within the confines of Princeton University, which he joined in 1934, he stood shoulder to shoulder with its best scholars. He was one of three men primarily responsible for the development of chemical engineering education at Princeton, and since 1954 he has served as departmental chairman. In June of this year he was appointed to the Henry Putnam University Professorship endowed to *provide for recognition of a scholar of extraordinary ability in any discipline*. At one time or another he had chaired or been a member of every important university committee, for he was noted for his conscientiousness, diligence, comprehensive knowledge, and impartiality in his decisions, decisions arrived at only after long and reflective thought. At the time of his death he was the sole engineering representative on the committee elected by the faculty for the study of the structure of the university.

His opinions and advice were widely sought. If a department of chemical engineering at some university was considering major changes, Dick Wilhelm would more likely than not be called in to survey the situation and give his counsel. He served as a consultant to many industries including Merck and Company and Mobil Oil Company, and nearly every chemical and chemical engineering society profited from his services on their committees.

He was known to thousands throughout this country and abroad not only because of his published work but because he traveled widely and gave numerous seminars and talks before groups large and small.

All of the above is a matter of record and is a simple objective reporting of some, but by no means all, of his professional activity. What of the man himself? How did he see himself in the scheme of things? While he appreciated the honors he received, he never sought them. While he gave of himself freely on committees and as a departmental chairman, he did not really enjoy administrative work. First, last, and always he regarded himself as an educator in the broadest sense of that term. He felt that his research not only opened doors to understanding, but it permitted his students to come face to face with scientific reality. He strongly favored experimental research so that one could see nature at work. He was no purveyor of facts and figures in the classroom. He seldom used a textbook, as he preferred his students to consult the original literature and perform their own syntheses. He often said that one of the values of his industrial consulting was that it kept his feet on the ground. He had a profound respect for theory, but he recognized that unless an engineer could apply this theory, it would be of little value to him. Although he was more at home in graduate teaching and research, he believed that the most important function of the university was the teaching of the undergraduates, and he devoted as much time to the preparation of an undergraduate lecture as he did to an address to be given before a learned society.

There are many phrases that one can employ to describe the character of the man: quiet and unassuming—on occasions somewhat shy—absolutely unquestionable integrity, demanding as nearly as possible perfection in himself and all who worked with him. However two words are especially revealing: enthusiasm and imagination. He possessed these in abundance. His mind roamed freely over many areas. He could talk intelligently with his colleagues in many diverse fields, and he constantly sought interrelationships among various areas of knowledge. Once he had seized on an idea, he pursued it with unbounded enthusiasm. He had the facility of transmitting this enthusiasm to his colleagues and students. As his students will testify, he worked as long and hard on a project as he expected them to do.

He was a gracious man. Whether escorting a visitor through the laboratories, as he liked to do, meeting with returning alumni in his office, or entertaining in his home, he was alert to the sensitivities of those around him and did all in his power to make them feel welcome and at ease.

Imperishable records attest to his professional prominence, but his long-range influence will not be found in the printed page or in the list of honors which came his way. Rather, he will live on in the memory of those who knew him and came under his spell. And the permanent effect of his life will best be revealed in the lives of those he most deeply influenced, his students. By any standard one chooses to use, he is revealed as a great chemical engineer and an outstanding human being.

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