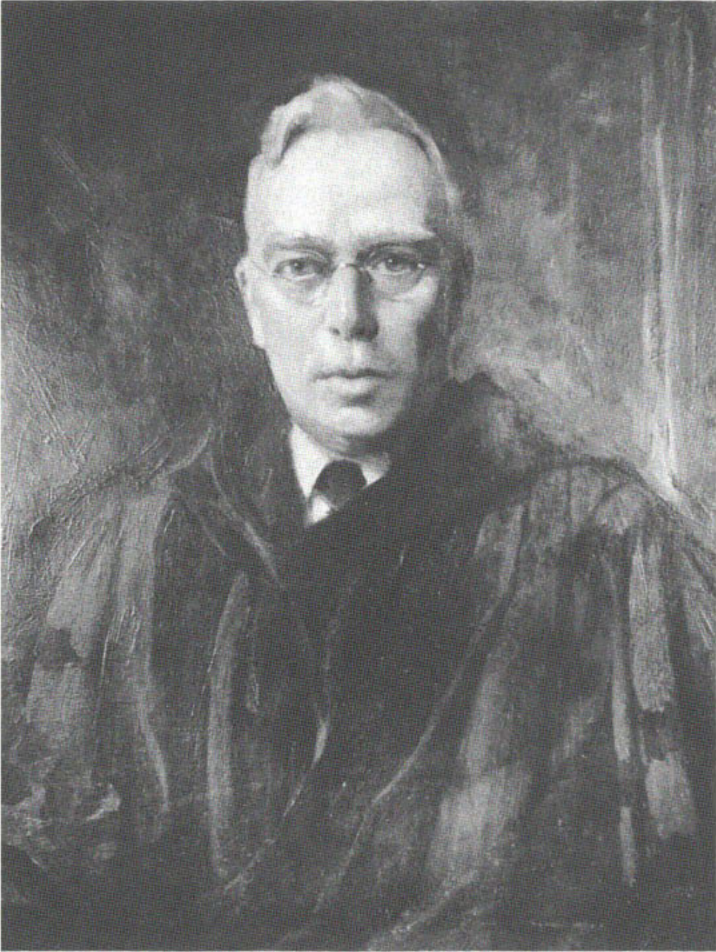
HERBERT E. HAWKES



# HERBERT E. HAWKES

*Dean of Columbia College, 1918-1943*

*By* WILLIAM ERNEST WELD

*and* KATHRYN W. SEWNY

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*The college was his vineyard and*
*in it he was a servant of the Lord.*

IRWIN EDMAN

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# I. INTRODUCTION

Herbert Edwin Hawkes was appointed Acting Dean of Columbia College in 1917 shortly after Dean Frederick P. Keppel was granted a leave of absence for war service with the government. The following year when Keppel resigned, Hawkes was made Dean. He held that office until 1943, through the years from the First World War to the Second, through a period of change and growth at Columbia.

When Hawkes became Dean, the school that had been founded as King's College in 1754 was trying hard to fulfill its original "good design of promoting a Liberal Education." It had survived many difficulties, even a serious threat to its existence created by the rapid growth of the professional and graduate schools, and had become a stable and assertive body. It was in good condition.

Yet change does not halt in colleges, and it went on at a fast clip between the two wars. The development of Columbia reflected the general trends in educational thought and the shifting concepts of American society. All college administrations were confronted with the question, How can the ideals of a liberal arts college survive and be realized in an era when the student is primarily concerned with the practical necessity

of preparing himself to make a living? Specific curricular problems faced them: Should the student be allowed greater freedom in his choice of a program? Should he be required to take a number of basic courses and then embark on elective courses? Should his own whims and fancies govern his choice of electives, or should those personal desires be channeled by the limitation of courses to a planned and correlated group?

In attempting to solve the problems posed by these questions, Columbia College pioneered in an important educational movement. It developed a curriculum based on a new concept of liberal arts education. The program was essentially the result of a team effort. Without the guidance of Dean Hawkes this cooperative achievement would have been difficult to realize. His administrative talents, his openmindedness, and his intuitive appreciation of what others had to offer in the realm of original ideas earned for him the admiration and respect of his faculty colleagues and the administrative officers in the University. But what was perhaps more important, the warmth of his human qualities caused him to be held in affection by those who worked with him over the years.

During the two decades between the wars the problems facing college administrators were not confined, however, to purely educational matters. Besides being concerned with freedom of choice in their studies, students were also concerned with their personal freedom. Just after the First World War college students made a cult of rebellion, defying the previously accepted ethical and moral values and making disrespect for their elders and distrust of the American business civilization in general basic articles of their creed. They gloried in the sobriquet of "flaming youth." Naturally this attitude, which extended with diminishing force through the period of

"unchecked prosperity" and the simultaneous era of prohibition, caused trouble for college deans. Many students, on the other hand, rejected this *avant-garde* rebellion and reflected the smug optimism that held sway in political and financial circles. After 1929, however, when the "big boom" gave way to the depression, questioning of economic and political practices and principles grew more serious, if less flamboyant, among college students. The spectacle of college graduates selling apples on street corners was disquieting. Young men, troubled by the collapse of their seemingly secure world, sought other answers. Unrest and dissatisfaction were rife. As the depression tapered to its end in the later thirties, optimism raised its head once more. But as troubles in Europe and Asia threatened war, collegians became increasingly aware of America's responsibilities in world affairs, and in their discussions they strove to assess the menacing truth in the situation. The visible dangers, following the depression, gave students a graver and more mature view. When war came, the young men of America went forth, sober with responsibility, not elated with the illusion of "making the world safe for democracy" that had buoyed up the young men who went to war in the first year of Hawkes's administration.

Dean Hawkes thus had to deal with varying moods and anxieties as one generation of students succeeded another. He faced them with the ideal expressed in 1910 by Nicholas Murray Butler:

"At Columbia College the Dean is not primarily a disciplinary officer, but rather the companion, the adviser, and the friend of undergraduates. It is part of the business of the Dean to know every College student and his history; to know where he comes from and what his circumstances are; to know where

he rooms and who are his friends; to know what he plans to do and what progress he is making. The Dean is at hand only incidentally to discipline and reprove students, but chiefly to advise, to encourage and to help them." [1]

When Herbert E. Hawkes was Dean, the door to his office on the ground floor of Hamilton Hall was always wide open. He was accessible to students at all times without an intermediary, without an appointment, without the need of an apology for coming. Each young man was treated not as a problem, but as an individual and as a friend. The Dean's counsel was based on knowledge and understanding of that particular student's background, difficulties, and aspirations, and on a desire to help him turn into the kind of man he wanted to become. As a result, sometimes the line of students waiting to see him stretched from his desk through the open door and far into the hallway. Columbia College men felt that they could take any problem to the Dean, academic or personal, complex or simple. No one left his office without feeling that Dean Hawkes had given the best of his understanding and experience toward solving the problem in hand.

Small wonder, then, that he was a well-beloved Dean. Students not only revered but loved him—with a love kept green over the college generations. He was a remarkable man not only in his ability to administer new educational programs but also—and even more—in his ability to help and guide all sorts of young men with warmth and effectiveness. His memory is cherished by those who worked with him and by the more than twelve thousand students who over a span of twenty-six years took their problems with great confidence through his open door.

[1] *Annual Report,* 1910, p. 41.

# II. EARLY YEARS

Herbert Edwin Hawkes was born on December 6, 1872, in Templeton, Massachusetts, a village in the north central part of the state about midway between Gardner and Athol in Worcester County. On a ridge that is an extension of the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Templeton commands a view of distant mountains to the east, north, and west. The town and the surrounding countryside have the quiet and austere charm of New England. At the center of the village, where the roads converge, is the attractive Common, shaded by stately ash trees and surrounded by imposing but not ostentatious homes as well as the public buildings associated with activities essential to the life of the community—church, town hall, school, library, historical society.

Templeton had followed a pattern of growth characteristic of many New England towns. It was originally an agricultural settlement comprising self-supporting homesteads. The early part of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of small business and industry when village stores, sawmills, gristmills, and blacksmith shops were established, and domestic workshops produced a variety of items such as furniture, tinware, straw hats, shoes, and carriages. In the second part of the cen-

tury many of these industries disappeared as two railroad lines and a main highway through the village brought Templeton in closer contact with the outside world. Reflecting the trends of American industry, its economic life became less independent and less self-sufficient.

This was the village where Hawkes spent the first eighteen years of his life. Anyone familiar with rural New England will appreciate the strong influence of its culture on a child. It is the village rather than the city that has preserved the New Englander's spiritual inheritance from his Puritan forbears and the political tradition of his American Revolutionary ancestors. It was long before outside ideas penetrated smaller communities, and therefore a major factor in their preservation of this tradition was the social cohesion created by the physical hardships encountered in wresting a living from a rocky soil in a harsh climate.

Perhaps nowhere else is one so conscious of the American democratic ideal in operation as in the New England town meeting. Here questions of direct concern to the whole community are debated freely on a face-to-face basis, and decisions are reached with full appreciation of their significance. Freedom of thought and speech is a guiding principle; minority opinion is respected as an expression of one of the inalienable rights of the individual. Nevertheless, the concept of liberty is limited by the rigid moral code of the Puritan. Man's responsibility to God and other men—and to himself—of necessity leads to the cultivation of such virtues as diligence, sobriety, and obedience. Although tolerance is implied in liberty, the acceptance of God-given criteria as to right and wrong imposes limits on the individual's freedom and leads to justice without compassion.