

MARION DEXTER LEARNED (1857-1917): THE FIRST AMERICAN DOCTORATE IN GERMAN?

In a recent edition of the *Arts & Sciences Update* published by the Krieger School of the Johns Hopkins University,¹ there is an article by Jeanne Johnson which celebrates the "seminar tradition" of the University. The seminar format which encourages the free exchange of ideas between scholars of all ages and ranks remains the cornerstone of a Hopkins' education on both the graduate and undergraduate level. The seminar itself became the basic unit of graduate education in the United States. Many, including Johnson, recognize the degree to which the specifically American concept of a graduate school which was born and nurtured at Hopkins owes a substantial debt to the German university model.²

From its inception in 1876, Hopkins—with its emphasis on and active support of independent scholarship and research in emulation of the contemporary German example—became the prototype of the graduate school in the United States. For those associated with the University its prestige as a pacesetter was always a source of pride, and quite naturally faculty and students in the department of German were pleased that praise of the university was inherently a tribute to its European model as well. It seemed only fitting, then, that the first American graduate school in the modern sense, having patterned itself so strongly upon German standards, should have conferred the first Ph.D. in German language and literature in the United States. Thus the academic equivalent of an urban legend established itself to the effect that Marion Dexter Learned, a man notable for his work in German-American cultural and literary relationships, was also significant

because his doctorate in German Language and Literature was allegedly the first of its kind in America.

For many involved in German-American studies, Marion Dexter Learned is a familiar figure, remembered for his pioneering work in comparative literature. In a virtually obscure letter nestled away in the archives of the Johns Hopkins University Registrar, Learned declares his belief that he was, in fact, personally responsible for the establishment of studies in American-German literary relations in the United States. For those who have been connected with the Johns Hopkins University over the years, Learned's reputation has taken on yet greater importance, for it was at "The Hopkins," as the university was called in the early years, that Learned earned his doctorate in German language and literature and received his first teaching assignment. And rumor had it that his was the first American doctorate awarded in German.

A one-page article in the February/March 1955 edition of the *American German Review* calls the veracity of the Hopkins' legend into question. This short piece states quite explicitly that the first doctorate in German literature in the United States was granted in 1886 at Columbia. Many may well have glanced only casually at the rather unprepossessing essay and the historical sidelight it presents. Indeed, even at Hopkins this minor instance of iconoclasm seems to have gone relatively unnoticed initially. The report in the *American German Review* affirms that one Hugo Walter received his Ph.D. in German Language and Literature at a commence-

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ment service at Columbia on the ninth of June, 1886, having previously received both the A.B. and the A.M. degree from that institution in 1883 and 1885 respectively. Further research into the Columbiana collection allows one to expand upon the article's presentation and add that the commencement was held that day at the Academy of Music and that Walter's thesis preparation was most likely accomplished under the guidance of Hjalmar H. Boyesen, then Gebhard Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures. Hugo Walter's career was prematurely terminated with his death in 1896, only ten years after he received his degree.

1886 has always been the year cited for the completion of Marion Dexter Learned's doctorate as well. At first glance, then, the two men seem to have finished their work at approximately the same time, but a final determination of the actual sequence has never been made. The case of Hugo Walter is clear; his thesis is dated May 1886, and he received his degree publicly in June of that year. Although the exact date on which Walter's doctorate was officially granted cannot be determined, the records in the Columbiana collection at Columbia confirm that that Walter would have been formally examined for the doctorate only after he submitted his thesis. His new academic honor could then not have been granted any more than a month previous to the public ceremony conferring the degree. An equally precise date for the completion or bestowal of Learned's degree has not yet been established. However, a thorough search of the somewhat sketchy records of the early years of the Hopkins reveals a chronology of Learned's academic progress.

Marion Dexter Learned—he seems to have preferred to use his full name whenever

possible—first enrolled as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins in the autumn of 1884. He came to Baltimore from the Dickinson Williamsport Seminary where he had spent the period from 1880 to 1884 and had earned both an A.B. and an A.M. In applying, Learned was required to fill out a form which supplied the university with a terse curriculum vita. This same document was then taken over by the registrar and used to record a student's progress while in attendance. Application blank thus became transcript, and for many students during the early years a single piece of paper was the only documentation of their career at Hopkins. Archival files contain but little more for Marion Dexter Learned, yet his transcript faithfully records his advancement. For the academic year 1885-1886 he is listed as a "Fellow" and commencing with the fall of 1886 he became a member of the faculty with rank of Instructor. From 1888-1893 Learned held the title of Associate and from 1893 until he left Hopkins in 1895 for a position at the University of Pennsylvania he was an Associate Professor.

The remaining university records as preserved in the Registrar's archives do not, in fact, note the date on which Learned attained his doctorate. The only notice is of the public confirmation, recorded simply as June 1887. The *University Circulars* for August 1887 (VI, 59: 124) supply one with the exact date: 14 June 1887. A perusal of the university's records on Marion Dexter Learned does not, then, resolve the question surrounding achievement of the Ph.D.; for although one can pinpoint public conferral one cannot derive from existing information the actual date upon which the degree was granted. The Hopkins' *Circulars* do, however, supply enough additional evidence to

determine beyond any reasonable doubt that Learned received his degree after his colleague Hugo Walter at Columbia.

The *Circulars* for January 1885 (IV, 36: 38) relate the contemporary prerequisites and conditions for obtaining a doctorate at the Johns Hopkins University. To be eligible for the degree one had to register one's intent and desire at least one year in advance and submit a final, typescript copy of one's dissertation at least three months before the degree was to be granted. Learned's finished thesis bears the date March 12, 1887. According to regulations existing at the time he could not then have officially received the Ph.D. until after 12 June of the same year, barely two days before the public ceremony. In actuality, then, Hugo Walter's degree was granted almost a full year before Learned's. That 1886 had become the date traditionally cited for the completion of Learned's work can probably be attributed to the fact that Learned would have been required to register sometime in 1886 his intention to pursue the degree.

The supposition that Learned in fact did not complete his studies until the next year is corroborated by additional evidence. A November 1886 listing of the faculty in the *Johns Hopkins University Circulars* (an issue printed after July 1886, i.e., VI, 52: 2)

lists only Learned's previous degrees from Dickinson. Moreover, in a letter dated 12 June 1886, Henry Wood, then chairman in German at Hopkins, reviews Learned's degrees as he recommends the young man to President Gilman for a faculty position; the doctorate is not, however, mentioned.

It would seem that a long-accepted Hopkins' legend fails to stand up to scrutiny. Yet the very research which rectifies a minor factual error concerning the University's early history simultaneously highlights the University's long tradition of scholarship based on the German model. The names of Henry Wood, who received his doctorate in Leipzig before coming to Baltimore, as well as Ira Remsen and B. L. Gildersleeve, both with graduate degrees from Göttingen, remind one of the many who brought the German experience to the United States and translated their knowledge into a dynamic institution of higher learning with the founding of the first American graduate school. Marion Dexter Learned, himself a product of that environment, may not have obtained the first American doctorate in German, yet he did go on to lead an active life as an academician and the fine tradition of scholarship attested to in his work can be attributed to his training at Hopkins.

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Notes

¹ "Tested as by Fire: The Seminar Tradition at Johns Hopkins," *Arts & Sciences Update*, 5 (Winter/Spring 2003), 2, 16-21.

² see also Augustus J. Prah, "Germans Scholars at the Johns Hopkins University," *Report 30* (1950), 67-72



House-warming Party for newly-built Fischer family home on Bird River Road, 1933