

Edwin R. Bingham (1920–2009)

By Richard Etulain

American cultural historian Edwin R. “Bing” Bingham, a longtime and popular professor at the University of Oregon, made significant contributions to Pacific Northwest history and to scores of students. With his strong narrative approach to history, he worked closely with Earl Pomeroy, an important analytical scholar in western history, to establish a well-respected academic program and to form one of the most notable historical partnerships in Oregon.

Edwin R. Bingham was born in Denver on January 21, 1920. An only child, he moved with his parents to Huntington Park, California, where he attended public schools. He earned a bachelor's degree in history at Occidental College in Los Angeles and joined the Army Air Corps in 1941, serving until 1945. In 1943, he married Helen Hopkins; they had two daughters and divorced in 1951. He married Virginia Wright in 1952; they also had two daughters and later divorced. Bingham lived with Ruth South, his librarian partner, for the last twenty years of his life.

Returning to the study of history after the war, Bingham received a master's degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1949 and a Ph.D. in 1951. He was hired in 1949 by the History Department at the University of Oregon, where he joined a faculty that included Earl Pomeroy and later Kenneth Wiggins Porter. The triumvirate engineered a strong program in the history of the American West, and Bingham remained there until his retirement in 1982.

Bingham listened to and conversed endlessly with his students, who crowded into his courses. He was a strong influence on undergraduate students in his United States survey courses and upper-division students in his courses on American cultural-intellectual history. Graduate students gravitated to his seminars to learn how to produce smoothly written and diligently researched theses and dissertations. He was the influential mentor of scholars Eckard V. Toy, William G. Robbins, and Richard W. Etulain and of politicians Neil Goldschmidt and Peter Simpson (Wyoming).

Bingham's first book, *Charles F. Lummis: Editor of the Southwest* (1955), drawn from his doctoral dissertation under John Caughey at UCLA, demonstrated his expansive interest in the cultural-intellectual history of the American West. He edited several books, including collections on the California Gold Rush, the American frontier, and the fur trade. He coedited two books, a collection of documents and essays with Robert Hine, *The Frontier Experience* (1963), and an anthology of original essays with Glen Love, *Northwest Perspectives: Essays on the Culture of the Pacific Northwest* (1979). Bingham began an extensive study of C. E. S. Wood, a controversial military leader, writer, and lawyer. While never completing the life story, he published *Charles Erskine Scott Wood* for the *Western Writers Series* at Boise State University (1990) and coedited *Wood Works* (1997) with Tim Barnes.

After retiring from teaching, Bingham gave presentations for public history programs. As part of the Chautauqua program sponsored by the Oregon Council for the Humanities, he and an actor traveled throughout Oregon presenting programs on historical characters, with Bingham providing the cultural-historical backgrounds for the presentations. He was president of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association and was selected as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer in India (1978–1979) and China (1985). In 2003, he received the University of Oregon's Distinguished Service Award.

Edwin Bingham died in Eugene on July 2, 2009. His legacy is in his influence on his many students and his contributions to the literary and cultural history of the Pacific Northwest.

Sources

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