



Dr. Macon Leiper

WKU English

Department Head 1918-1928

by Collin Massie

“You may think what you please about me if you will only learn to think.”

- Dr. Macon Leiper to his students

As the first WKU English department head, Dr. Macon Leiper has a special place in the department's history. Before becoming the Head of English, he was WKU's Head of Latin. However, even before then he was involved with WKU at varying levels. Overall, Dr. Leiper's involvement with the university was one that spanned more than twenty years. One year after the Western Kentucky State Normal School was born, he was the youngest of five new members added to the faculty in 1907. From then on, his career with WKU continued until his forced retirement in 1928, due to ill health.

Dr. Leiper taught Latin, English, and philosophy. He wrote a number of academic books that include *Latin Subordinate Clause Syntax*, *Teaching Language Through Agriculture and Domestic Science*, *Language Work in Elementary Schools*, *A New English Grammar* (which he co-authored with who would become the second Head of the Department of English, Dr. Gordon Wilson), *New Idea Speller*, of which he was co-author, and *Errors Made by College Freshmen in Their Written Composition*. The Leiper/Wilson work *A New English Grammar*, which was published in 1923, was a text aimed at high school students. It was adopted by the state of Kentucky and ended up bringing academic distinction to WKU's English Department.

Born July 25, 1879 in Malvern, Ark, Dr. Leiper was raised and eventually attended high school there. At the age of twenty-two, he graduated from the University of Nashville in 1901 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Before arriving at WKU to become a

professor of Latin, Dr. Leiper began his career teaching Latin at Peaboir College, Ark. in 1901, and then at Maddox Seminary, Ark. 1902-1903.

Dr. Leiper continued his academic studies up until and during his faculty position at WKU. He received his Master of Arts degree in 1905 from the University of Columbia, and in the same year, his Master's Diploma from the Teacher's College in New York. He studied as a graduate student at the University of Columbia and then at Princeton University during the years of 1904-1907. After WKU had officially become a four-year college and two years before his retirement in 1928, Dr. Leiper received his PhD from Peabody College in Nashville.

On a more personal note, the year Dr. Leiper was added to the WKU faculty (1907), he married a woman named Mary Elizabeth Taylor, who hailed from Nashville and would become head of the Kentucky Library staff at WKU. She would remain Mrs. Mary Taylor Leiper until two years following Dr. Leiper's unfortunate passing. They had one daughter together, Elizabeth Leiper, who would eventually become Mrs. Joseph Pryor.

Dr. Leiper was forced to retire from active involvement at WKU in 1928. The illness that forced his early retirement remained with him for another eight years, until his death on June 17, 1936. He was fifty-six years old.

His legacy has remained with the university's English department through the years. His contribution as department head has enabled department heads down the road to build the department stronger and higher, brick by brick—or perhaps it should be said, student by student.

According to later head of English, Dr. Jim Flynn, in his "A Centennial History of the Department of English of Western Kentucky University," Dr. Leiper was known as a demanding, but esteemed instructor. He did not give students an easy way out. He made sure that they understood the necessities of thinking critically and engaging in active discussion. He was known to have often said to his students, "You may think what you please about me if you will only learn to think," (4).

Sources

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