

Dodd, William Edward ^[1]

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by W. Conard Gass, 1986

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"William E. Dodd and his wife Martha in the garden of the American embassy, Berlin, ca. 1935." Image courtesy of the University of Chicago.

^[2]William Edward Dodd, educator, historian, and diplomat, was born on his father's farm near Clayton, the oldest of the seven children (five boys and two girls) of John Daniel and Eveline Creech Dodd to survive infancy. Of English or Scottish origin, the Dodd ancestors of William Edward had been in America since the 1740s, when the first of the family to arrive in the New World, Daniel Dodd, settled among the Highland Scots in the Cape Fear valley ^[3]. Through his mother William Edward was related to Sam and Ashley Horne ^[4], industrialists of the New South, who in the 1890s established a cotton mill at Clayton. Although better off economically than most of their neighbors, the Dodds felt the pinch of the poverty that plagued the post-Civil War ^[5] South. Young William Edward worked on his father's farm, but he also studied hard enough to earn the reputation of being Clayton's most studious boy and soon exhausted the resources of Clayton's five-months-a-year free school. He then attended the Utopian Institute, a private academy at Clayton, before spending a year at Oak Ridge Military Academy ^[6] in the north central area of the state. Unsuccessful in his attempt to win appointment to West Point and failing to gain admission to The University of North Carolina ^[7], he served briefly as principal of the Glen Alpine public school and then enrolled in the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (now the Virginia Polytechnic Institute ^[8]) at Blacksburg.

In his four and a half years at Blacksburg, Dodd studied a variety of subjects, most of which were new or nearly so to him, but he was most interested in English, history, and economics. He also discovered that he had a talent for writing and gave much time to student publications. Following his graduation in the spring of 1895, he spent the summer teaching in Clayton's public school but returned to Blacksburg as a graduate instructor in history the following autumn. After completing the M.S. degree in 1897 he combined his savings of \$750 with \$1,500 he borrowed from his Uncle Sam Horne, a Raleigh ^[9] businessman, and on 7 June sailed from New York for Germany and the University of Leipzig to study for the Ph.D. in history. At Leipzig he was fascinated by Karl Lamprecht's lectures on German cultural history but probably was more influenced in his development as an historian by the seminar in recent German political history conducted by Erich Marcks, who also directed Dodd's dissertation. Although based on scant research, this work, entitled *Thomas Jeffersons Ruckkehr zur Politics, 1796* (1899), or *Thomas Jefferson's Return to Politics in 1796*, arrived at conclusions about the origins of the Democratic ^[10] party that are still accepted as valid. In early August 1899 Dodd passed his final examination for the Ph.D. *cum laude* and soon afterwards returned to the United States. Despite the help of ^[11]Josephus Daniels ^[11], influential editor of the Raleigh News and Observer ^[12], he found it impossible to obtain a college teaching position.

Believing that professional recognition could be gained mainly by his spoken and written word, he began a program of research, lecturing, and writing, including research for a biography of Nathaniel Macon ^[13] (1758–1837), political theorist and agriculturalist and for thirty-seven years a member of the United States Congress.

In the summer of 1900 Dodd accepted a one-year contract to teach and organize a department of history and economics at Randolph-Macon College ^[14], a Methodist ^[15] school at Ashland, Va. Despite a heavy teaching load, he undertook to introduce into his classes the latest and best methods of studying and teaching history. Less than a month after joining the faculty in September, he organized the Randolph-Macon Historical Society for the collection and study of North Carolina and Virginia documents. He soon had a small number of junior and senior students writing essays and editing documents for *The John P. Branch Historical Papers* ^[16], a quarterly journal that Dodd launched in June 1901 and named for its financial sponsor, a wealthy Richmond banker. Although Dodd disliked Ashland, he was unable to find another position and agreed to remain at Randolph-Macon for a second year. On 24 Dec. 1901 he married Martha Johns of Wake County ^[17], N.C.

Meanwhile Dodd had begun to correspond with his fellow scholars as well as with men prominent in public life, a practice he was to continue for the rest of his life. He had also joined with John Spencer Bassett ^[18] of Trinity College ^[19] (now Duke University ^[20]) and others in a crusade to raise the standards of history teaching in southern institutions. The publication of his *Life of Nathaniel Macon* ^[21] (Spring 1903) won him national recognition as an historian and secured his position at Randolph-Macon, where he was granted tenure and his teaching load was reduced to nine hours a week. Nevertheless he remained anxious to leave Ashland. He continued to work on his *Jefferson Davis* (1907), published articles in the *American Historical Review*, the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, and other periodicals, and took an active part in Virginia politics as a progressive Democrat.

In 1908 Dodd accepted a teaching position at the University of Chicago ^[22], then the country's leading graduate school, and in January 1909 joined its excellent history department, which was eager for him to develop the study of the Old South. He rapidly settled into a productive routine of teaching and writing and was soon at work on a one-volume history of the South. Believing that he could best present his story through the analysis of individual lives of southern leaders, he determined to base his book on earlier lectures on Thomas Jefferson, John C. Calhoun ^[23], and Jefferson Davis ^[24], whom he considered the most important statesmen of the Old South. The result was his *Statesmen of the Old South* ^[25] (1911), which immediately gained the approval of fellow historians. In its emphasis upon Jefferson's reliance on a political alliance of the South with the West in gaining the presidency, the book appealed especially to progressive historians. And in its argument that the antebellum ^[26] period demonstrated a shift in power from Virginia's Jeffersonian liberalism to South Carolina's political conservatism and cotton ^[27] capitalism it provided historians of all creeds with a still valid point of departure for the study of the Old South. The sketches of individual statesmen have fared less well.

Shortly after moving to Chicago Dodd became actively involved in Illinois and especially Chicago politics. By the end of 1910, like thousands of other Democrats ^[10], he had concluded that all hope for the success of progressivism in the United States depended on the election of Woodrow Wilson ^[28] as president in 1912 and had begun to work toward that end. Highly pleased by Wilson's victory at the polls, he did not hesitate to write to the new president about policies and personnel appointments as late as April 1913. Although he could see no evidence that his advice had any influence on Wilson, he continued to have faith in the president's liberalism and redoubled his efforts to make history a tool for progressive advance.

Toward this end he decided in March 1913 to abandon his extensive book-reviewing and lecturing in order to concentrate on the preparation of a new four-volume survey of American history: Houghton Mifflin's *Riverside History of the United States* ^[29], of which he was to be editor and of which he was to write the third volume *Expansion and Conflict, 1828–1865* ^[30] (1915). Although he had drafted seven of the projected sixteen chapters by the following May, he found it impossible to work steadily on the book while carrying his usual teaching load through the spring and summer quarters. Consequently, when the summer session ended on 29 August, he left immediately for a nine-months' siege of writing in the Blue Ridge of Virginia, where he had purchased a 150-acre farm in Loudon County, three miles outside the village of Round Hill and fifteen miles west of Leesburg, an environment in which Dodd's writing prospered. Here he completed a first draft of *Conflict and Expansion*, although it was not ready for the printer until the end of 1914. The book emphasized western and southern developments of the antebellum period, focusing on sectional conflicts and the shifting political alliances that rose to power or disintegrated according to the triumph or failure of the economic groups that supported them.

Dodd found time to make known his opposition to U.S. involvement in the war that had erupted in Europe in the summer of 1914. However, he became increasingly aware of the potential threat to the United States posed by a possible German victory and neither opposed nor supported the policy of "reasonable preparedness" adopted by President Wilson following the sinking of the *Lusitania* (7 May 1915). From the moment the United States declared war against Germany (6 Apr. 1917), Dodd opposed all dissent and made evident his desire to contribute to the public information on the war. He agreed to prepare for publication by the Northern Trust Company of Chicago a series of pamphlets on prewar American foreign policy. In addition, he sent a variety of materials to George Creel's Committee on Public Information and to the National Board for Historical Services. In October 1917 he agreed to prepare a report on the problems of American foreign trade, the Far East, and the Monroe Doctrine for Colonel Edward House's American Preparatory Commission (the Inquiry) on American proposals for the peace conference at the end of the war. At his own request he was soon excused from this task. And in December 1917 he resumed work on the Yale Chronicle volume he had tried unsuccessfully to begin in 1916. This book, *The Cotton Kingdom* ^[31] (1919), which dealt with the lower South from 1840 to 1860, argued that the cotton plantation had dominated antebellum southern life and analyzed that dominance.

After the war Dodd gave his unreserved support to the cause of the League of Nations, especially in lectures and in the

publication of his highly propagandistic *Woodrow Wilson and His Work* ^[32] (1920). Although he met with repeated defeats in political efforts to promote the cause of progressivism in the 1920s, he derived much satisfaction from his personal and professional life. He was, in fact, probably the University of Chicago's most exciting teacher at this period. Popular as a lecturer to undergraduate classes, he evoked equally enthusiastic response from his graduate seminars. With Ray Stannard Baker he edited six volumes of *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (1925–27), and in 1928 he published his *Lincoln and Lee: Comparison of the Two Greatest Leaders in the War Between the States* ^[33]. In 1927 he was appointed chairman of the history department at Chicago. He resigned the position on 13 June 1932 in order to devote more time to his teaching and writing but especially to politics, mainly, it appears, because of the prospect of a Democratic presidential victory in the forth-coming November election.

Although Dodd had backed Franklin D. Roosevelt ^[34] for the Democratic ^[10] nomination as early as April 1932, he played only a limited role in his campaign after the nomination. For believing Roosevelt a sure winner, Dodd concentrated on postelection concerns and especially on his hope for an influential position in the new administration. Following Roosevelt's inauguration, Secretary of State Cordell Hull offered Dodd his choice of several minor diplomatic posts, all of which Dodd declined. Apparently he had given up all expectation of a significant role in the Roosevelt administration when, on 8 June 1933, the president offered him the ambassadorship to Germany; under Roosevelt's prodding Dodd accepted it within two hours' time. In Berlin Dodd worked hard but soon alienated his embassy staff by trying to live within his income and according to his Jeffersonian ideals rather than diplomatic protocol. Finding it impossible to conduct meaningful negotiations with the Nazis, who more and more dominated all aspects of German life, he increasingly limited his mission to investigating and reporting developments within Germany and evaluating their likely effects upon European and world affairs. His never-cordial relationship with the State Department deteriorated rapidly after February 1937 and he was recalled the following December.

Returning to the United States in early 1938, Dodd retired to his Round Hill farm to attempt a defense of his Berlin mission and to resume his historical writing. In the midst of his strenuous labors in Berlin he had found time to complete the first volume of a four-volume history of the Old South, which he had long planned to write. Entitled *The Old South: Struggles for Democracy* (1937), it was a study of the seventeenth-century southern colonies, which Dodd saw as the battle-ground of a significant struggle between democracy and absolutism. But his health failed rapidly from a combination of respiratory, nervous, and abdominal ailments, and a second volume was never completed. During 1938 he lectured widely on foreign affairs despite a throat condition that made it increasingly difficult to speak. On 24 Jan. 1939 he entered Georgetown University hospital for rest and observation of his throat ailment. Although he left the hospital on 28 February, he was never able to resume his speaking schedule. On 8 Feb. 1940 he contracted pneumonia at his Round Hill farm, where he died the following day and was buried on 10 Feb. He was survived by his two children, William Edward, Jr., and Martha Dodd (later Stern). His wife had died suddenly of heart failure on 28 May 1938. A United Press International photograph of Dodd as he appeared in early 1938, shortly after his return from Berlin, serves as the frontispiece of Robert Dallek, *Democrat and Diplomat: The Life of William E. Dodd* ^[35] (1968).

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