

**ROBERT M. CUMNOCK (1848-1928) BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIALS, 1877-1975**

**Series 20/1/1**

**Box 1 (half-size)**

**Biography**

Robert McLean Cumnock, founder of Northwestern University's School of Oratory, was born in Scotland in 1840 to a large Presbyterian family. In 1842, the family moved to America, eventually settling in Mason, New Hampshire, by 1852. Cumnock paid his own way through Wilbraham Academy, a private secondary school, because his family could not afford it. While he attended, he was older than the other students. In 1860, when he was almost twenty-one and still attending Wilbraham, he joined the army to fight in the Civil War. He fought for three months, and then signed up again, staying for another full year, before returning to Wilbraham. He graduated in 1864, intending to go on to Yale, but instead he went to Wesleyan in Middletown, Connecticut, partly because of its religious affiliation.

At the encouragement of his friend, Reverend Raymond, who worked at the Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Cumnock began teaching Elocution at Northwestern University in 1868 after he finished his own schooling. Cumnock taught Elocution from 1868 to 1873, and Rhetoric and Elocution from 1873 to 1913. His students and fellow teachers held him in high esteem, feeling that no one was more passionate about the importance of speech education than he was. In 1878, Cumnock created a two-year diploma program when he formed the Cumnock School of Oratory, with the first class graduating with the degree in 1881. In 1894, Northwestern University and Cumnock signed a contract allowing Cumnock to have a building constructed to house the School of Oratory. An important donation to the new building came from Chicago meat-packer Gustavus Swift, whose daughter had attended Northwestern before her untimely death. Annie May Swift Hall, designed by architect George Maher, opened in 1895, and for many years the catalog described it as the only structure specifically built for education in speech.

Cumnock headed the School of Oratory until he retired in 1913. In 1910, the school honored Cumnock by hanging his portrait in Annie May Swift Hall, and Northwestern University awarded him the degree of Doctor of Letters in 1919. Cumnock died on November 28, 1928, and a memorial service was held for him in Annie May Swift Hall on December 5, 1928.

The School of Oratory was renamed School of Speech in 1921, and became the School of Communication in 2002. Over the years, the School that Cumnock founded has produced many notable alumni in fields ranging from acting to audiology.

See also: Lynn Miller Rein, *Northwestern University School of Speech: a history* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1981), and Mattern, Grace, "Biography of Robert McLean Cumnock," M.A. thesis, Northwestern University 1929 (copy in the University Archives).

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**Description of the Series**

This series includes materials from Cumnock's life at Northwestern and materials related to public interest in Cumnock after his death in 1928. The series begins with a small collection of biographical materials. A little publication of "Speeches and Papers Given at the Unveiling of the Cumnock Portrait" and a collection of quotes about Cumnock from various newspapers form the bulk of the biographical materials.

The obituaries and eulogies folder contains newspaper articles relating to Cumnock's death and transcripts of remarks written by Paul M. Pearson, N.U. President Walter Dill Scott, Prof. James L. Lardner, Agnes Law and Dean Ralph Dennis and delivered at the Memorial Service for Robert Cumnock that was held at Annie May Swift Hall on December 5, 1928. These remarks were later published in booklet form, copies of which are included in this folder.

Correspondence, arranged chronologically, spans the years 1880 and 1928. The bulk of the correspondence after 1913 is between Cumnock and Ralph Dennis, the close friend and colleague who succeeded Cumnock as Dean of the School of Speech. Of special interest is an 1895 letter from Frances E. Willard to Cumnock in which she congratulates him on the new building for the School of Oratory and applauds what he has done to extend the opportunity of education in oratory to women as well as men.

The clippings relate to Cumnock's work at Northwestern and his involvement with the Chautauqua Conventions.

A handful of programs illustrate the venues where Cumnock appeared for speaking engagements, and list examples of selections read at such events.

Two contracts between Northwestern University and Robert Cumnock document the foundation of the School of Oratory and the ongoing relationship between the School and the University. The first, from 1894, actually established the School of Oratory and named Robert Cumnock as its director. The other contract, from 1912, would have been the last one between Cumnock and the University before he retired.

The remainder of the collection mainly consists of posthumous interest in Cumnock's life. One folder contains correspondence regarding Cumnock that was sent to and answered by the University over several decades. Three years before Cumnock's death, Dean Ralph Dennis began to prepare for this inevitability by requesting that alumni send reminiscences of Cumnock to be used in eulogies and publications upon his death. A few examples of these remain. Upon Cumnock's death, letters of condolence were sent to Dean Dennis by friends, colleagues and alumni.

The research correspondence (Grace Mattern) was generated while Mattern was preparing her master's thesis (1929), a biography of Cumnock. Correspondents include Cumnock's former

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students and colleagues. In 1950, L. Elaine DuCharme wrote a paper on Cumnock for her Problems in Interpretation class for Dr. Wallace Bacon (School of Speech).

**Provenance:** The Robert Cumnock Biographical Materials are comprised of materials from the Faculty Biographical Files, Accession Number 79-133.

**Restrictions:** None.

**Separations:** A few duplicate items were discarded.

**Processor:** Zoe Streicker-Howard and Sarah Rose; August 2003.

**Reformatted by:** Rachel C. Teuer; July 19, 2004.

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**Container List**

<b><u>Box</u></b>	<b><u>Folder</u></b>	<b><u>Title</u></b>	<b><u>Date</u></b>
1	1	Biographical Materials	1910-1960
	2	Obituaries and Eulogies	1928-1929
	3	General Correspondence	1880-1928
	4	Clippings	1898-1926
	5	Programs of Readings	1877-1892
	6	Contracts: Northwestern University and Robert Cumnock	1894, 1912
	7	Correspondence Regarding Robert Cumnock	1940-1975
	8	Dean Ralph Dennis: Requests for Reminiscences	1925
	9	Letters of Condolence (to Dean Dennis, School of Speech)	1928-1929
	10	“Robert McLean Cumnock: The Man and His Speech Philosophy” by L. Elaine DuCharme	1950
	11	Research Correspondence for Grace Mattern’s biography of Robert Cumnock	1929