

## IN MEMORIAM

GORDON M. FAIR

President Boston Society of Civil Engineers 1939-1940

### His Legacy To The Engineering Profession

Some fifteen years ago a highly regarded journal of the civil engineering profession published a personality profile titled: "Master of the House - and Much of What He Surveys."

This story in the ENGINEERING NEWS-RECORD opened with the declaration that few, if any, contemporary Americans have exerted a greater influence on engineering than Gordon Maskew Fair. However, it went on to say, evidence of his accomplishments were not to be found in monumental structures. He did not work with steel or concrete. His work had to do with moulding the minds of men.

Included with this account was a roster of distinguished leaders in the practice and teaching of environmental engineering. This list presented only a cross section of the more than 700 graduate students whose professional careers and contributions to society were shaped by Professor Fair.

Far greater in number — and far beyond the halls of Harvard — are those who have been influenced by this eloquent advocate of environmental harmony and the application of engineering skills for its attainment. His writings on these matters have been translated into many languages. And with small regard for personal travail he carried his teachings to lands around the globe.

One of his colleagues in the Rockefeller Foundation — which he served as a member of the board of scientific directors and, incidentally, was the first engineer to achieve such distinction — had this to say: Whether it be in the swamps of Sardinia, in the jungles of Brazil, in the lecture rooms of the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris or in the laboratories of the London School of Hygiene, the presence of Gordon Fair inspired all those with whom he came in contact.

In probing the genius of this man who was affectionately known as the "high priest" of sanitary engineering, one discovers two outstanding characteristics — a great depth of perspective and an uncanny sense of revelation.

On the one hand he was the interpreter of history, reminding us, in the words of George Santayana, that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." No matter what aspect of sanitary engineering doctrine or technology was brought forth for discussion Professor Fair was always prepared to document its origins, merits and limitations, and from this extract lessons appropriate to solution of the problem at hand. Once he told me: "My students probably regard me as an incorrigible antiquarian; but I am simply seeking to demonstrate how one may profit from a knowledge of past labors."

On the other hand, Gordon Fair was the clairvoyant whose intuitive capabilities led to the identification of emerging problems before they were recognized as matters of concern to the profession at large. Thus he was able to delineate areas for research and engineering investigation, the importance of which now assumes dramatic dimensions as the nation mounts an intensified campaign to curb the pollution of water, air and land resources.

Earlier I alluded to the conviction of Professor Fair that constant vigilance must be exercised and safeguards devised to counter the destructive impacts of man on his environment. Dedicated to this proposition, he chose engineering as the fulcrum, and teaching as the lever, for moving the minds of men to cope with scientific and technological change.

That today the sanitary-engineering profession is uniquely prepared to respond to rising social initiative for protecting the environment in no small measure can be credited to Gordon Fair and those hundreds of disciples who came under his tutelage during the past half century. With assurance it can be said that the arsenal of technology is amply stocked and engineering talent already mobilized to advance this new crusade for pollution abatement.

This, then, is the professional legacy of the man in whose memory we have gathered to pay tribute. His endowment of knowledge and vision will continue to enrich all those who aspire to apply engineering skills for improving the welfare of mankind.