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The Passing of an Extraordinary Man

Dr. Sydney Fairbanks, a former editor of the *NSA Technical Journal*, who had worked for NSA for sixteen years before his retirement in 1967, died on 30 July 1985, at the age of 90.

Dr. Fairbanks was among those in the Agency then (for there were giants in the earth in those days) who could hold honorable place – and did – in pursuits far removed from the one in which they earned their daily living. Born in New York City, Dr. Fairbanks grew up in England and attended school there before returning to this country in 1911. He entered Harvard at the age of fifteen and before he bade farewell to the undergraduate state on the square, he had been to school in England again where his skill at Greek verse won him a scholarship to that other Cambridge; had driven an ambulance in France, Italy, and Palestine during World War I (and had been awarded the Croix de Guerre for courage under fire); had served as an interpreter between French and Italian troops; and had accompanied Ambassador Johnson to Rome as private secretary (from whom he was to receive subsequently a letter saying: "This will introduce Sydney Fairbanks who can do anything he says he can.").

When that period ended, he went on to Harvard Law School where he proved to be an exceptional law student. Before he eventually doffed the coif and robe, he managed to see a good piece of the upper crust of the American legal world as editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, law clerk to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, and lawyer in the Cleveland legal firm of Newton D. Baker. Felix Frankfurter once said to him: "The trouble with you, Fairbanks, is that you thought the law was a learned profession." When he became convinced that it wasn't – and that a learned profession was what he wanted – he went back to Harvard.

This time he took his doctorate in Middle English and published his *Old West Frisian Skeltanariucht*. It was then that he was elected to the Frisian Academy and entered on a highly successful teaching career culminating at St. John's where he was one of the few men in the history of that eminent institution who could teach the entire curriculum – Greek, Latin, French, German, mathematics, physics, and chemistry – and *did*.

At the outbreak of the Korean War, Dr. Fairbanks abandoned Academe and came to NSA. One of his first jobs was to give body to the idea that an establishment which employed the minds and skills of so many members of so many professions owed it to itself to sponsor a journal to help them communicate with each other. Dr. Fairbanks was named as the first editor, and he created the *Technical Journal* out of the fabric of his disciplined mind, his wide-ranging knowledge, and especially his understanding of the monumental difficulty with which people talk to people.

After leaving the Agency, he worked for a while for the Maryland Historical Society and continued his long-time study of the Voynich Manuscript which increasingly occupied his later years.

The ever dwindling band of those of us who knew him remember him with affection and esteem. As a writer, editor, teacher, counsellor, and, above all, as a friend, he left an impression on his generation that will not soon be erased. With his death, the Agency has lost a truly great and very rare human being.

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