

# **William Allen Erwin**

## **by Archibald Henderson, Parish**

### **Historiographer**

#### **1925**

The new Chapel of the Cross, a beautiful memorial to William Rainey Holt and a contribution of incalculable value to the cause of religion, is the gift of William Allen Erwin. No extended sketch of the life of this captain of industry and noble-minded philanthropist will be attempted here. (1) To his mother, Elvira J. Holt, daughter of William R. Holt, he ascribes his chief obligation for lofty ideas, aspirations and ambitions.

In matters of large public welfare, Mr. Erwin has been zealous, active and devoted. During Governor Glenn's administration he was a member of the hospital commission consisting of five men appointed to use funds appropriated by the legislature to enlarge and improve state hospitals for the insane. Declining the chairmanship of the commission, he served energetically as chairman of the building committee. One of the buildings at Raleigh, named by the hospital authorities in his honor, was erected at his suggestion to care for only mild cases of insanity. The isolation of the mild cases has resulted in a great increase in the percentage of cures. At his suggestion, also, nurses' buildings were erected at both Raleigh and Morganton, these buildings providing sanctuaries of rest and relief for nurses when off duty.

During the World War, Mr. Erwin was active in all good works. He was food administrator for his district, consisting of seven counties; chairman of the Council of Defense for Durham; and chairman of the United War Work drive for seven counties. Three of the four Erwin Company Mills, offered by him to the government, were commandeered. These mills made denims for soldiers' overalls, olive drab cloth for uniforms, and sheets and pillow cases for the emergency fleet. All mill operatives were cheerfully released on call to the colors. Mr. Erwin performed valiant service in the organization and support of the various war drives among the employes of the Erwin Company.

As captain of industry and leader in the textile industry in this section, Mr. Erwin enjoys an enviable reputation. The range of this work is indicated by the fact that he now has in charge twelve cotton mills with about 290,000 spindles and 7,450 looms. As an employer of labor, he has displayed the most humanitarian principles. He was one of the first textile employers to reduce the hours of work and to forbid the employment in his mills of children under twelve years of age. In his mills, no dissolute person is employed or permitted to live in the mill community. Mr. Erwin has striven successfully to maintain a high atmosphere in his mill communities, and has actively interested himself in the education of the operatives. The mill villages, under his fostering care, are pleasant places in which to live, enjoying modern conveniences, playgrounds, good schools and good churches.

In church affairs, Mr. Erwin has performed service of the highest value, marked by large financial generosity and active personal work. On October 23, 1889, Mr. Erwin was married to Miss Sadie L. Smedes, the youngest daughter of the late Aldert Smedes, D.D., the founder of St. Mary's School, Raleigh. For many years, Mr. Erwin has actively aided in the support of St. Mary's School. He was chairman of the committee which purchased the present school property from the Cameron estate. Ever since he removed to West Durham in 1873 he has been superintendent of a flourishing Sunday School. The Men's Bible Class, which he conducts, has an average attendance of over one hundred.

As a philanthropist, Mr. Erwin has been a regular and generous contributor to church work of various sorts, of both local and state-wide influence. A notable feature of the gift of the Chapel of the Cross was the liberal endowment for aid in its support and maintenance. In 1926 Mr. Erwin established the trust fund to care for the Chapel of the Cross. By the deed of trust, the first use to be made of this fund is to keep the church fully insured; and the remainder is to be used for general maintenance, subject to the approval of the Bishop. He has given liberally to the support of St.

Philip's Episcopal Parish, Durham. In addition to the beautiful Chapel of the Cross here, he individually built and gave to the diocese the pleasing St. Joseph's Chapel, built of stone, at West Durham; and provided funds for the erection of a suitable Parish House. The church and parish house at Erwin were also the gifts of Mr. Erwin. He has established trust funds, the income from which is to be used for the support of the Episcopal churches at West Durham, Erwin and Cooleemee; and made generous donations toward the erection of a church building at Erwin and Cooleemee. Mr. and Mrs. Erwin jointly have established a baby ward at St. Peter's Hospital, Charlotte, in memory of their grandson, Hamilton C. Jones; and have made generous gifts to the Thompson Orphanage. Mr. Erwin was successful in the campaigns, both of which he headed as chairman, for the Clergymen's Retiring Fund and the first Nation Wide Campaign in his diocese.

A man of virile force and strong intellect, Mr. Erwin has lived a life of splendid material accomplishment. He has successfully overcome the many obstacles which from time to time have confronted him, buoyed up by a strong sense of faith in work and confidence in the future. More conspicuous than these traits and accomplishments are his benevolent and philanthropic spirit, his will to good deeds. In a private letter, he once thus opened his heart to a friend: "I have striven not to become rich, but have centered my whole heart and soul in the desire and ambition to make a man after the type of my father in character, and with it to maintain his name and honor, and to establish for myself all the success in a business way that faithful, earnest and persistent efforts may bring." (2)

1. An authoritative account of his life and career, by W. S. Pearson, is found in the "Biographical History of North Carolina" (Greensboro, N. C., 1906), III, 114-121. For helpful information concerning Mr. Erwin's life since 1906, the date of that publication, I am indebted to Mr. Kemp P. Lewis, Durham, N. C.

2. Since this sketch was completed in 1925, William Allen Erwin has passed from this life, in Durham, North Carolina, on February 28, 1932.