Wilkes University
Commencement, May 27, 1995
Citation for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters

GEOFFREY CHAMPION WARD

You have taken the American experience as your canvas and with words and photographs have depicted us in all our diversity, complexity, banality and beauty. At Oberlin College you majored in Studio Art and further developed your artistic gifts. It is as a writer, however, that you marshalled your abilities to tell our stories as a people. Author of more than a thousand essays and articles for the *Encyclopedia Brittanica* and the *Reader’s Digest Family Encyclopedia of American History*, you early captured the essence of virtually any historical event or personality in clear and compelling prose. In your five years, first as managing editor, then editor of *American Heritage* magazine, you married sound scholarship and evocative historical photographs to enrich the telling of our national history.

In your continuing *American Heritage* column, "The Life and Times," your reviews of new biographies have made you one of the foremost authorities on historical biography. Not just critiquing others, you focused on one of your heroes, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, telling his story from childhood to the presidency in two volumes, *Before the Trumpet* and *A First Class Temperament*. The latter was a winner in 1990 of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Biography, the Francis Parkman Award of the Society of American Historians, and *The Los Angeles Times* Award for Best Biography. Your presentation of F.D.R.'s personal development, particularly the nurturing influence of his mother, Sara, has become the definitive interpretation. In your recent and much acclaimed book, *Constant Companion: The Unknown Story of the Intimate Friendship Between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Margaret Suckley*, you have again deepened our understanding of F.D.R., the dominant American political personality of this century.

The distinctive accomplishments of your career have come into sharp focus over the past few years in your prize-winning collaboration with Ken Burns on a new kind of television documentary. As principal writer for "The Civil War" and "Baseball" series, both on PBS, you created a powerful new vehicle for helping us understand our nation's history. Earlier, you applied your editing talents to the WGBH-TV series, "The American Experience," featuring programs on F.D.R., the Kennedys, Richard Nixon, Huey Long, Thomas Hart Benton, Charles Lindbergh and General George C. Marshall. Now you are completing work on another epic for PBS on "The West," showing the defining encounters between the Native Americans and the American settlers. In these creative acts you and your colleagues have engaged the broad American public in a profound historiographical analysis of our shaping national crises, characteristics and personalities, without using the word historiography.

Writer, historian, editor, biographer and documentarian extraordinaire, you, Geoffrey Champion Ward, are a model of intelligent communication, exemplifying the power and pleasure of telling our nation's story to the broadest possible audience with unforgettable images and narratives.

By the power vested in me by the Board of Trustees of Wilkes University and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I hereby bestow upon you, Geoffrey Champion Ward, the degree Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris Causa, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto.