THOMPSON IN HISTORY

- Master Views Craft

By EMORY THOMAS

Ringing challenge and penetrating analysis keynoted Dr. S. Harrison Thompson’s lecture, “The Growth of a Discipline: Medieval Studies in America,” at Hamman Hall last Thursday evening.

A survey of the historiographic development and present status of the “scholarly guild” of medievalists, the lecture was the first of four being presented by the Rice History department as part of the Semicentennial celebration.

DR. THOMPSON assessed the achievements of American medievalists with enthusiasm, but called for renewed efforts in certain areas of study and more attention to the specialized “tools” of the medievalist’s craft.

Master of eighteen languages, Dr. Thompson pronounced a knowledge of twelve as prerequisite for thorough Byzantine or Slavic study.

MIXING pride in his field with challenge to more exalted scholarship, he stated, “the field of medieval studies is broad and comprehensive, and the medievalist is convinced he is the proper custodian of the secrets sought by the modern disciplines. He is probably right.”

Condemning the “apologetic” presentation of medieval studies, Dr. Thompson pointed to the immediate medieval background of American discovery and settlement.

“Medieval history is early American history and should be so presented,” he asserted. Americans were deemed particularly fit to examine their medieval past because the objectivity of their heterogeneous heritage.

AFTER LAUDING the early contribution of amateur historian Henry Charles Lee, Dr. Thompson cited the effects of the German “scientific” school as a necessary evil in the technical development of American medievalists.

He emphasized the importance of World War I in ending the stifling German influence and in broadening the scope of American scholarship. The founding of the American Medieval Academy and the scholarly journal Speculum in the nineteen-twenties organized and vocalized the leading American scholars.

ENCOURAGED and financed by media such as these, medieval studies have grown and matured with distinguished help during the past quarter century from emigrants of the totalitarian states of Europe.