

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
ROBERT W. ACKERMAN
(1910-1980)

Robert W. (Bill) Ackerman, Professor Emeritus of English Philology, died of a heart ailment after a short illness in Hanover, New Hampshire, on October 13, 1980, at the age of 70. All his friends mourn him; those of us who knew him well for many years feel a deep sense of loss. We extend our sympathy to those who survive him: his wife, Gretchen Paulus Ackerman, his daughter Elinor, and his son George. Bill had a rare capacity for friendship as well as for compassion.

A native of Ohio, he took his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Michigan. After holding several short-term teaching positions, he served in the Army from 1942 until 1946. Upon his release from the Army as a Captain, he joined the faculty of Stanford, remaining until his retirement in 1973. He was a devoted and effective teacher; many of his former students, some now prominent scholars, became his personal friends. He was a leading member of both the Medieval Society of America and the International Arthurian Society. Throughout his professional life he was a productive scholar. His publications in his chosen field of specialization, Middle English literature, are too numerous for reference in full. However, several should be mentioned: an edition of *Syre Gawene and the Carle of Carelyle* (1949); an *Index of the Arthurian Names in Middle English* (1952); *Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature* (1966); and his final work, prepared in collaboration with his wife, *Sir Frederick Madden: A biographical Sketch and Bibliography* (1979). Madden's voluminous diary, extending for fifty-three years of the mid-nineteenth century, served Bill and Gretchen as their principal source for the biographical sketch, which provides an entertaining account of an important era in Middle English scholarship.

Bill took up his duties at Stanford at the time of the arrival of a great number of recently mustered out servicemen. Their experiences in World War 11 were still very green; life in academia asked for adjustments and reassessments among faculty and students alike. Just out of the Army himself, Bill understood the frustrations of men delayed in the preparation of their careers. He met these frustrations, academic as well as personal, with tact and friendly warmth. But he never compromised his professional standards. To him, a scholar was a person who made an unusually stubborn effort to make sure he was telling the truth; and by living that concept, both in the classroom and in his publications, he earned unusual respect in the academic community. Generous with his considerable learning, he won hearts as well as minds. These same qualities, so evident shortly after his arrival, characterized his whole career at Stanford.

His predecessor as Professor of English Philology, Herbert Meritt, has written a personal reminiscence that should be quoted:

Bill Ackerman shared an office with me for many years, and I recall those years there as a happy time.... He was a very likeable person to be with.... We always had at hand the volumes of the NED, and a remark from either of us—even about the weather—could call for consultation of some word in the NED and then on to other dictionaries like the MED and Webster's, so that bits of spare time passed in a pleasantly lexicographic way.

Someone had tacked to our door a sign 'Please do not feed the philologists,' but for many years our room was the gathering place at lunch time with other members of the department

where topics of various kinds were passed about usually briefly, always informally and at times rather wittily. Some chairs became reserved by tradition, one for Yvor [Winters] and one for George [Sensabaugh], for example. Bill, at some particularly pithy remark, would swing about in his swivel chair, arise and slap his thigh in complete appreciation.

It was characteristic of Bill that what he enjoyed he enjoyed thoroughly—for example the English language, Old English, Middle English, Modern English. He loved to come up with some new interpretation. The solution of some Arthurian place name, for instance, could bring with it pleasure and excitement which he was eager to communicate to others. He was a scholar and teacher who liked his job and was very good at it.

Bill always gave generously from his great store of affection and learning to his friends, his students, and his colleagues. Whenever new members arrived to join the English faculty, he would be among the very first to welcome them and their families, greeting them warmly and finding many ways to help smooth their arrival. He was inexhaustible in caring for his students, both graduate and undergraduate. His copious and meticulous notes on the culture of the English Middle Ages were famous among Medievalists—apart from using them for his own teaching and publications, he let his students and colleagues at Stanford and elsewhere mine these rich veins in preparing scholarly works of their own.

Bill's retirement years were happy as well as productive. With his wife and young daughter, he moved to Walpole, New Hampshire, near the residence of his wife's parents. There he prepared a study equipped with standard reference works and was steadily active in writing and research. He participated in community affairs, notably in providing informed assistance to the Bridge Memorial Library. He held teaching positions as a visitor, two of which took him away from Walpole, at the University of Wisconsin and at the University of Victoria. He was a prominent member of the Episcopal Church in Walpole as he had been in Palo Alto. A highly respected resident of Walpole, he will be missed there as he is at Stanford.

John Loftis, Chairman
Kenneth Fields
Herbert Meritt
Lawrence Ryan
George Sensabaugh