

## MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

### NEWELL F. FORD (1912 – 1989)

Newell F. Ford, Professor emeritus of English, died of pancreatic cancer at his Palo Alto home on April 4, 1989 after a long illness. He was seventy-seven years of age and had been retired for twelve years. He is survived by his wife, Mary Ellen, whom he married in 1981; a sister, Mrs. Waldo Bowman of Portland, Oregon; and a brother, Loren D. Ford of Bellevue, Washington. His former wife, Alysoun, from whom he was divorced in 1967, now lives in Mendocino, California.

Newell was born in Portland, Oregon, on March 10, 1912. He received his A.B. from Reed College in 1936, his M.A. at Harvard in 1938, and his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1945. In 1945 he came to Stanford as an instructor in English and rose through the ranks to full professor in 1963. He retired in 1977 but continued to advise a number of graduate students and for a while taught a Freshman Seminar on "Shakespeare's Vision of the Human Scene."

His scholarly interests centered mainly in the Romantic Period of English Literature, particularly in the poetry of Shelley and Keats. His first book, The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats, was published by the Stanford University Press in 1951 and reprinted by Archon Books in 1964. In 1974 he re-edited the Cambridge Edition of The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, for which he wrote a new introduction. During his career at Stanford he published some twenty-five scholarly articles and a number of reviews in professional journals. He left in manuscript form two scrupulously executed works of scholarship which, because of their specialized nature, never saw print: *Bird-Imagery and Symbolism in English Poetry* and *Water-Imagery and Symbolism in Nineteenth Century Poetry and Music*. Together these manuscripts reveal his love of literature, his passion for music, and his delight in the world of nature.

Newell's teaching, as might be expected, focused mainly on the English Romantics; but he also taught "The Bible as Literature" (a course he created) and Shakespeare, whose plays became a part of his repertory both in class and at home, where he directed student productions in his spacious living room. This "stage," with its three separate entries, soon became known on campus as "Ford's Theater." He brought to his teaching, as well as to his writing, honesty, precision, and meticulous care for detail, qualities that inspired lifelong devotion among graduates and undergraduates alike. These were indeed the hallmarks of his character and work.

When in his later thirties, or about five years after his arrival at Stanford, Newell developed an "ever present and crippling" hypotension, which he battled for the rest of his life. This physical impairment proved to be a drain on his academic life, sapping his energy and denying him travel to professional meetings. But he fought his infirmity by participating in strenuous sports, such as tennis, which he played almost like a professional; and he became an

ardent hiker, keeping up with the best of the breed in the High Sierra and elsewhere. Such activity turned out to be therapeutic, allowing him to lead what seemed to others a normal life.

A lover of nature, he became an avid gardener, a meticulous grower of fruits and vegetables. Gardening became almost an avocation, which he approached not only with enthusiasm but also with an immense fund of expert knowledge. Ask him about the native strains of apples or what was attacking your tomato plants, and he could tell you, or knew where to find the answer. He was an ecologist and environmentalist before these words made their way into general discourse. He was an unstinting supporter of organizations like the Sierra Club and the Natural Resource Defense Council, pointing out the danger of pesticides and delighting his friends and neighbors with generous gifts of fruits and vegetables organically grown.

Newell's most remarkable achievement for a man suffering from chronic hypotension was constructing his dream house at 244 Santa Rita in Palo Alto, where he lived and died. As he looked back on this achievement in the year of his retirement, he wondered how he and his wife had the courage to attempt such a monumental task. "But youth is incurably romantic and fearless", he remarked at that time, "and I guess we were". With only his wife and an uncle to help him in physical labor, and Victor Thompson's *Tomorrow's House* to guide him through abstract designs of function and form, Newell laid a foundation and erected thereon a structure of glass and wood, including plumbing, wiring, roofing and painting. "The whole house", Newell once explained, "was built around the grand piano", which stood at one end of a 30 x 18 foot living room, over-arched by a 12 foot ceiling so designed as to be acoustically perfect. The room itself became the locus of many a musical evening, to which Newell-- himself an accomplished clarinetist-- often contributed. The place indeed possessed an ambience that enhanced poetry readings, receptions, parties, and class meetings. This semi-public room, so to speak, was completely cut off from the bedrooms and from Newell's study, so that scholarly activity and audible activity could take place simultaneously without the latter disturbing the former. Members of the Department, students, and friends outside academia remember that room as a source of social, intellectual, and artistic enrichment.

Newell's building his own dream house in the face of heavy odds sums up his essentially romantic spirit -- committing human limitations to heroic tasks and to sublime aspirations. Romantics like W.B. Yeats, Carl Jung, and Robinson Jeffers often identified themselves with their houses. Yeats saw his identity emblemized in his restoration of Thoor Ballylee in Ireland; Jung carved a totemic image for his stone house in Switzerland; and Jeffers in Carmel built *Tor House* and *Hawk Tower* overlooking the coastline of which he wished to be a part. Newell's house of glass and wood is no less symbolic of the striving -- and achievement -- of his romantic soul.

On April 22 a small group of relatives and friends gathered in the high-ceilinged living room of that house to remember and celebrate Newell's life and work. In that familiar setting, formalities rightly began close by the grand piano, the original symbol around which the whole house had been built. Talented friends there brought to life selected pieces from Bach, Schubert, and Schumann. At the other end of the living room a colleague read lines chosen by Newell himself: passages from Shelley and Keats, and from the Roman Stoic Marcus Aurelius, as well as the whole of *Mansions*, a singularly apt short poem by a contemporary, A.R. Ammons. All the readings echoed the lines from Shelley: "He is made one with Nature: there is heard / His voice in all her music. But the first stanza of Ammons' poem was Newell himself speaking:

*So it came time  
for me to cede myself  
and I chose  
the wind  
to be delivered to.*

Albert J. Gelpi  
Wilfred Stone  
George F. Sensbaugh, Chairman