

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

WALLACE STEGNER (1909 – 1993)

Wallace Stegner, Jackson Ely Reynolds Professor of Humanities Emeritus, died April 13, 1993 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, of complications following an automobile accident. He was 84 years old. He had served on the English Department faculty from 1945 until 1971 and was the founder and for fifteen years the Director of the Stanford Creative Writing Program. He was known in the environmental movement for his early leadership and throughout the literary world as one of America's most important writers.

A son of the west, Wallace Stegner was born in Lake Mills, Iowa, in 1909, the second son of two Scandinavian immigrants. He spent important early years in Saskatchewan, but he often compared his family migrations to the tumbleweed, in constant movement over the Great Plains. His father, he said, was "a boomer, a gambler, a rainbow chaser," always in search of the big rock candy mountain. When Stegner was a child, the family lived in 21 different houses in nine years, and in almost as many western states. They finally settled in Utah.

Wallace Stegner received an A.B. degree from the University of Utah in 1930, an M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1932, and a Ph.D. from Iowa in 1935. He began his teaching career at Augustana College, went on to teach at the University of Utah, the University of Wisconsin, and Harvard. By the time he came to Stanford he had already embarked on his truly remarkable writing career. His first novel was *Remembering Laughter*, published in 1937; his last was *Crossing to Safety* published in 1987.

This 50-year career is unique in American letters. Not only did Stegner publish books for over half a century, but also he mined many different kinds of writing. He is of course best known for his thirteen novels and three volumes of short stories. With the 1943 publication of *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, a fictional account of his own family's migrations, he was viewed as one of his generation's most promising writers. *All the Little Live Things* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1971. *The Spectator Bird* won the Commonwealth Gold Medal and the National Book Award in 1976. His short fiction, which he more or less gave up writing in the 1960s, frequently appeared in O. Henry Prize Stories. *Collected Stories*, published in 1990, was on the New York Times best seller list, an amazing feat for a volume of short fiction.

Fiction was Stegner's true love, but he wrote many different kinds of books. His books of history include *Mormon Country* and *The Gathering of Zion*, in which he wrote of the settlement of Utah, and his biographies include *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, the life of John Wesley Powell, and *The Uneasy Chair*, the life of Bernard DeVoto. *Wolf Willow*, *The Sound of Mountain Water*, and his last book, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, contain stories and reminiscences and cautionary essays about his beloved west – the last was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1992.

In all he wrote and published 27 books. In addition he edited half a dozen collections, including *Great American Short Stories* with his wife Mary Stegner. He wrote numerous articles and reviews for many national journals, including *Harper's*, *Atlantic*, *American Scholar*, *Esquire*, and *Saturday Review*.

Begun decades before protecting nature was a popular cause, Stegner's work as a conservationist would alone have secured him a permanent place in American history. He served on the boards of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society and was founder and first president of the Committee for Green Foothills. In the Kennedy Administration he was special assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall. All his life, Stegner cared deeply about the west, about "the barren plains pimpled with gopher mounds and bitten with fire and haired with dusty woolly grass."

Elsewhere he wrote that "the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness [a human being] is a challenging upright thing." Stegner was far from sure the challenge had done the land much good. He was particularly concerned with the destruction of wilderness and the damage ignorant settlement can do to the west. "You have to get over the color green," he wrote. "You have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale; you have to understand geological time." In his profound response to nature, he was often likened to Henry David Thoreau and John Muir.

Stegner was a wonderful teacher, of both literature and creative writing, his very high standards accompanied by a good deal of compassion and humor. When he was in the classroom or when a student was in his office his attention and caring were total. There may have been some who aroused his impatience, but students were not among them. Perhaps his most famous and important contribution to Stanford was his founding in the early 1950s of the Creative Writing Program. Through this program, Stegner nurtured many of America's best writers. The program is a permanent monument to him.

Stegner received many awards and recognitions during his long career. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He was awarded honorary degrees by the University of Utah, Utah State University, the University of Wisconsin, Middlebury College, and the University of Montana State, where a chair has been established in his name. In 1992, he was awarded the National Medal for the Arts – this he refused, to protest against political pressure exerted on the National Endowment for the Arts.

Stegner was an immensely disciplined person. He once likened the writer to the beaver, who, having the teeth for it, must gnaw. He wrote every day of his life, on planes, trains, perhaps on horseback. And he was willing to keep after a project long after the satisfaction of creating had given way to the hard work of revision. He was impatient with intellectual fads and never hesitated to say so. He was a liberal in politics, a traditionalist in morals, an activist for causes he believed in.

Wallace and Mary Stegner were married for fifty-nine years. Theirs was a marriage clearly based on consideration, shared interests, respect, and tenderness. Together they took delight in a rich social life and many friends here and throughout the world, in travel to foreign

places, in their house deep in the woods of Los Altos Hills, in their summer place in Vermont. Their son, Page, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, was a source of great affection and pleasure, as were their three grandchildren, Rachel, Page, and Allison.

We are grateful for sharing such a life.

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