

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

VIRGIL KEEBLE WHITAKER (1908 – 1984)

With the death of Virgil Whitaker, the Department of English loses a tie with its earlier years. Virgil entered Stanford as a freshman in 1926, thirty years after the graduation of the University's first four-year class. Except for a year of teaching in the state of Washington (1933-1934) and three years as Superintendent of Education in the United Pueblos Agency, he remained at Stanford as a student, member of the faculty, and professor emeritus until his death in March.

He knew personally or by the reports of his teachers and older colleagues almost everyone who has taught in the Department of English. He relished Stanford lore as only a few persons do. He could tell with his customary gusto of being awarded a graduate fellowship by the Board of Trustees at the same time as they voted four times the amount of his stipend for the stud services of a prize bull, or of marching behind John Philip Sousa's band up to what is now [the University President's] house on an evening in November, 1928, to serenade Mr. Hoover, President-elect of the United States.

For many years Virgil devoted his impressive personal and intellectual gifts to the service of the University and gained an international reputation as a Renaissance scholar. He was the author of important monographs on Edmund Spenser, The Religious Basis of Spenser's Thought (1950), and on Francis Bacon, Francis Bacon's Intellectual Milieu (1962). He also published two notable books on Shakespeare, Shakespeare's Use of Learning (1953), and The Mirror up to Nature: The Technique of Shakespeare's Tragedies (1965). In the crowded field of Shakespeare studies, the earlier book in particular has won a distinguished place. Widely and respectfully reviewed, and cited in the bibliographies as one of the key works on Shakespeare, it has been described by a leading authority in the field as:

a compendious survey of Shakespeare's use of sources and allusions, a consecutive study of his dramatic and philosophic development, and an analysis of the philosophic and religious ingredients and total import of most of the chief plays and some others.

Virgil's work on Shakespeare as well as his other writing and his teaching showed the results of sound training as a Stanford undergraduate in Latin and Greek. He majored in Classics, and in his later years he used his knowledge of the classical languages and literatures most effectively in both his writing and his teaching. His first published book was an edition of the Medieval Latin text, Excidium Troiae (1944; in collaboration with E. B. Atwood). In the classroom as in public lectures he could authoritatively but unobtrusively introduce appropriate references to Greek and Roman authors. In recognition of his accomplishments as a literary scholar and teacher, and of his devotion to the Classics, in 1963 he was appropriately chosen to be the first Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities.

Virgil was an excellent teacher, of both graduate and undergraduate students. Even during the years when he was executive head of a large department, he frequently taught the survey course for English majors. One Stanford alumnus, now a distinguished medieval scholar himself, has recalled that when he was enrolled in the course, not only did the students give Virgil a standing ovation after the final lecture, but many also had tears in their eyes because their exposure to his brilliant teaching was drawing to a close.

In 1941, Professor Whitaker served as a consultant to the Southwest Field Training Program in the United Pueblos Agency of the United States Department of the Interior -- a program designed to prepare candidates for the administrative positions in Indian schools. In the following year, he was appointed Superintendent of Education in the same agency and department, in charge of two boarding schools and twenty-six day schools for Indians in northern New Mexico. Granted leave from Stanford, he held this position until the end of World War Two, at which time he returned to pursue his academic career here on campus. In 1959-1960, subsidized by the Fund for the Republic, he served on and prepared the reports for the Commission on the Rights, Liberties, and Responsibilities of the American Indian. His association with Indians in New Mexico left him with a deep respect for their artistic achievements, as evidenced by the many beautiful rugs and pieces of pottery with which he later graced his campus home.

In the dozen years (1951-1963) that Virgil served as executive head, the Department of English flourished as an organization can only when it has firm and imaginative leadership. It is probably fair to say that during his tenure in the position the department first gained national recognition as one of the select group of distinguished departments of English. During 1962-1963, he continued as executive head and served simultaneously as Associate Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences.

In 1964, the year following his appointment as Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate Division, Virgil was in a position to promote an idea he had long held: that the performing arts -- particularly drama -- should be performed, not simply studied in vacuo. This idea found fruition in the Stanford Summer Festivals of Art, which he founded in 1964 and directed until 1969. To celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth at the inaugural series of events, he secured the services of the Ashland, Oregon, Shakespeare Festival Company; the San Diego National Shakespeare Festival Company; and the San Francisco Actors' Workshop. Throughout that summer, Shakespeare's characters walked the board in a replica of the Globe Theater, erected in Frost Amphitheater. During the years of his directorship, Virgil also brought the Joffrey Ballet to Stanford and sponsored such groups as the Opera di Camera di Milano, the New York City Opera Company, and Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra. Count Basie entertained the community with his distinctive jazz rhythms. Fourth of July concerts by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band from New Orleans drew large audiences, and, before the summer festivals closed down, had become associated with Stanford's annual celebration of our national holiday. The implementation of Virgil's idea not only enriched campus life, but also left a lasting mark on the culture of the Bay Area.

After nearly twenty years of administrative service, both curricular and extracurricular, Virgil relinquished his decanal duties in 1969 and turned again fully to

teaching and research. Even when burdened with administrative detail, however, he had found time to teach a class or two, to publish articles and books, and to encourage and inspire his dissertation candidates. Now he could travel, pursue his scholarship, and spend more time in intellectual exchange with his doctoral graduates, many of whom had secured positions in some of the best universities in this country and in Canada. Retirement in 1974 simply meant that he no longer taught scheduled classes in the Department of English. He never finished his book on Francis Bacon, which he had hoped might crown his scholarly career. But he must have found consolation in the admiration and respect accorded him as a teacher, scholar, and friend. He was among the few in academia to whom students dedicated their books and for whom they named their children. On March 23 Virgil Whitaker died; but he left a living legacy of ready wit, insatiable curiosity, catholicity of interests, and zest for a life enhanced by literature and the arts.

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