

The "Literati" at Iowa in the Twenties

CHARLTON LAIRD

It was a no-win question, as I well knew. The "I" was a beginning graduate student at The University of Iowa in the autumn of 1925 who had come to be examined on a trial bibliography for a proposed thesis and to endure whatever else the instructor in "Bibliography and Method" might propose by way of purgatorial initiation.

The questioner was Professor Thomas A. Knott, with varying degrees of affection known as "Tommy," who was soon to become managing editor of the *New International Dictionary*, second edition, although none of us knew this as yet, not even Tommy. He was deeply devoted to scholarship, had a thunderous voice, and a prognathous jaw. I could imagine a deity, absorbed in matters of greater moment, absentmindedly tossing into the mixture that was to become Tommy Knott enough mandible for two jaw-jutting humans.

"You have made the acquaintance of Mr. Cross's little book?" he asked. "Mr. Cross's little book" was Tom Peete Cross, *Bibliographical Guide to English Studies*, like Tommy himself a product of the University of Chicago. To slight it was *lèse majesté*.

But what could I say? If I implied that I had gone over Cross with such care as I could muster—which I had—my scraps of learning would have been inundated in Tommy's all-submerging knowledge. If I said I had been too busy to give the masterpiece the attention it deserved, and would eventually get, something would have happened, although I could not envisage what. I tried to compromise.

"Well, I have—uh—I have skimmed over it."

Tommy's tremendous jaw crept forward. He had already picked up the "little book" and was threatening me with it as though he had been interrupted while swatting a fly. Now he was using it to emphasize the thunders of his rhetoric. "This is CONCENTRATED STUFF," he hissed. "If you skimmed over it, you bounced off of it!"

I don't remember how I got out of the room; only later did the scene seem to me amusing. Eventually Tommy and I became somewhat chummy. He realized that I was working hard and that my intentions were good, but that was not until after, as university news editor, I had written the story about how Tommy had jockeyed the G. and C. Merriam Company out of \$15,000 a year, a princely honorarium in the days when \$5,000 was rare for academic emolument. He believed he had struck a blow for the learned professions generally, setting a new standard for their worth. And I fancy he had.

That is not the reason I rehearse the story now. Iowa had a remarkable department of English in the twenties and a somewhat unusual assemblage of students. I have been asked to write something about them—I am one of us few octogenarians extant, but in a sketch as brief as this, I cannot get much beyond anecdotes. I hope, jumbled together, they may mean something.

Most of the faculty at Iowa from that time is dead now, and I can only sketch what must have been going on. At about the turn of the century, Professor Clarke Fisher Ansley came from Nebraska, where he had associated with Louise Pound, Willa Cather, and other critical and creative people, including Edwin Ford Piper, whom he brought to Iowa. He built a department devoted to good teaching and to critical and creative work. At Nebraska Ansley had helped launch the new literary magazine, *Kiote*, and at Iowa he was involved in floating *The Midland*, later edited by John T. Frederick. I have been in his summer home near Glennie, Michigan; it was stuffed with evidence of one who knew writers and loved writing. Apparently, he resigned to become editor of Columbia University Press, where he is credited with the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, a remarkable reference work.¹

Ansley was replaced as head by Hardin Craig, a man also as remarkable as Ansley. Craig was a scholar; he thought and lived to learn what was as yet unknown and how to get it into print. He did a superb edition of Shakespeare's collected works; wrote two volumes of the most exciting critico-scholarly essays, collected in *The Enchanted Glass* (1936) and *New Lamps for Old* (1960); published dozens of scholarly studies—some of them collected in *English Religious Drama in the Middle Ages*—and became an international scholar as well known in the British Museum and in the English Pub-

¹ Reminiscences by Ansley's daughter of her family's life in Iowa City and later in Michigan are chronicled in Delight Ansley, *First Chronicles* (Stockton, N.J.: Carolingian Press, 1971). (Ed.)

lic Record Office as any native could be. In this country Craig did not have the popular standing or the record for idiosyncrasy of a Kittredge, but his scholarly vita is at least as impressive. The last time I tried to see him, I did not; he was scheduled to speak at a session of the National Council of Teachers of English. Long before he arrived, the room was packed with former students, and the hall outside was jammed with others who hoped to catch at least the cadence of Craig's voice.

The last time I actually saw Hardin, we were both teaching in a summer session at Oregon in Eugene. We had gone out to dinner with friends and then to someone's house to talk. After midnight, some of us younger men were reminding ourselves that come 8 o'clock we would be teaching classes. But not Hardin. He must have been nearing 90, but he was still the life of the party and went home only because he would otherwise have been left alone.

I remember Craig's telling that he had asked John Matthews Manly,² "What is philology?" Most philologists I have known would have been likely to say something like, "The study of language and literature." Manly thought a minute and said, "It's life." I should say that is the way Craig tried to teach literature; he was laboring to get students to see what life is. Such teaching can be exciting, even for undergraduates. Of course nobody—not even Craig—could get a staff to do this, but I am guessing that he had meant to at Iowa and that he had impact.³

As I recall the department (I did not see it so at the time), it reflected two traditions, each good in its own way, but sharply differing. The tradition of Ansley was carried on by Piper and Frederick, and by a considerable number of good men and women who did most of the undergraduate work of the department but did not get much credit for it nationally. They included careful teachers whom I discovered too late for me now to remember even their names—for example, Scott, who taught an excellent course on the Bible, but I remember him because he voluntarily coached some of us in fencing.⁴ Then there were the people Craig brought, scholars one

² A great American scholar, of the Manly-Rickert *Chaucer* and many other works.

³ I should warn readers that most of my conclusions are drawn from undergraduate impressions. Inevitably, the persistence of undergraduate folklore has influenced me, though I trust that a half century of teaching and graduate study have done something for my perspective. Some few of these individuals—Craig and Piper, for example—I knew later as fellow teachers.

⁴ This was J. Hubert Scott (1878-1953). Professor Scott's personal collection of books and manuscripts relating to the Shakespeare forger William Henry Ireland was presented to The University of Iowa Libraries. (Ed.)

and all—Knott, Henning Larsen, and others who handled the graduate work and gave Iowa its reputation at the Modern Language Association.⁵ How much friction generated between the two heritages I do not know. My impression is that the participants were professionals, ladies and gentlemen, who kept internecine squabbles internecine. However, I do recall Piper, who taught the undergraduate course in Chaucer, observing that “they” would not let him teach the graduate course. He made a joke of it, but it was no joke.⁶

My personal acquaintance with The University of Iowa began in the autumn of 1920. I arrived in Iowa City in September. Having spent the year since high school trying to save some money, I had worked

⁵ Craig later went to North Carolina and then to Stanford. After him Norman Foerster brought another school of thought to Iowa, but I know of it only at second hand.

⁶ I expect to keep myself out of this article insofar as that is convenient, though I shall doubtless appear more prominently than I could wish. My recollections are my best source, however, and hence the reader should know something about me if one is to evaluate what I say. Accordingly, here is an unabashed autobiographical note.

I was born in Nashua, Iowa, March 16, 1901. My grandfather helped build the Little Brown Church in the Vale in the nearby village of Old Bradford, celebrated in the hymn of the same title. I grew to maturity in McGregor and environs. My father was an invalid most of the time I knew him. His estate was declared bankrupt, so that I had to put myself through college, which I did somewhat fitfully, stopping to earn money.

I was fortunate to be at Iowa in what I believe to have been remarkable years for writing already done and for more in progress. I was mainly associated with students who considered themselves collectively the young literati of the campus. I cut something of a figure in various student activities and emerged with a B.A. (1925), an M.A. (1927), a wife, née Floy Davis, mentioned in the text, and a job writing publicity for the university. Most of my days since that time have been spent in academic circles.

I have done a good bit of graduate study—at Iowa, Columbia, Stanford, and Yale, along with some abroad—and have taught in various universities, notably at the University of Nevada, Reno, where I became the first Hilliard Distinguished Professor in the Humanities, and eventually emeritus in English. I have published many reviews and articles, along with some books. A one-time journalist, I have no notion how many millions of words I have batted out for print, but the only serious compositions much involved in the decade here under review were two historical novels, *Thunder on the River* (1949) and *West of the River* (1953). They were not written or published in final form until long afterward, but drafts stem from the twenties. One little volume, *The Miracle of Language* (1953), was still in print after a quarter of a century, having traveled over much of the world. A textbook with Robert M. Correll, called *Modern English Handbook* (1953; 6th ed., 1976), has kept the wolf farther from my door than from most academic portals. A few other volumes are still in print, including a thesaurus. My current book on language, *The Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), contains a list of my better-known publications. I have edited a book on Walter Van Tilburg Clark, now in press. At this writing (1982), I am twice a widower, living in Reno, Nevada, my days enlivened by good friends and good reading.



Six books by Charlton Laird, selected from some two dozen volumes which he has written or edited. From the Iowa Authors Collection.

first in a lumber camp and later as a “wheat Willie,” a migratory worker following the wheat harvest from Oklahoma to Canada. I was naive, though unaware of it. I had expected to study law, not because I had any interest in the subject, but because of misinformation I had managed to derive from high school. We had courses in “literature,” but they consisted mainly of two volumes by Reuben Post Halleck containing biographies of selected literary figures (e.g., Tennyson and Longfellow) with a critical potpourri. We read about and talked about—even wrote about—these figures, but I don’t recall that we had been expected to read much of what they had written. I got the notion that most of them had started by studying law. Ergo, if one wanted to write, as I did, one should study law. Eventually I survived that notion; I later lived through another similar period in which I was told, “If you want to write, study journalism.” I survived that, too.

I was tremendously impressed with The University of Iowa, and delighted with it, both faculty and students. The teacher who did most for me was a sprightly young woman we called “Miss Wright.”⁷ We soon discovered she knew good writing when she saw it, or even passable writing, and that she was not to be cozened by sham or sentimentality. I was guilty of both, and she knew it. Most of the students—it was an honors section—had attended good high schools and read authors I had never heard of, but I learned as fast as my innocence would permit, and before the year was out my term paper had been accepted by the *Palimpsest*, a popular magazine of Iowa history, so that I became a published author of sorts, which nobody else in the class was. Miss Wright taught me more than any other single person ever has, partly because I had so much to learn, but partly also because she was so persistent and so perceptive in putting her finger on slovenly work.⁸

The faculty member who made the next most impressive reform

⁷ She was Luella M. Wright (1881-1963), later Ph.D., Columbia. She published three books on Quakers in literature and education as well as articles on Iowa literary figures.

⁸ She was also authoritarian after the fashion of her day. In some paper I had used a locution like “very pleased,” having no notion that anything suspect lurked in this seemingly innocuous sequence, but she informed me firmly that no literate person ever employed a past participle except when it could be preceded by *much*, as in “very much pleased.” I gathered that *much* was a sort of grammatical disinfectant, and I taught “Miss Wright’s law” for years, until one day I became aware that none of my colleagues had ever heard of it. I have since ceased dashing it with red ink, but I still wince whenever I hear “very pleased.” The incident helped me to learn, what I had begun to suspect, that much pedagogical belaboring is not worth the trouble.

was, not surprisingly, Edwin Ford Piper. The word would get around—I don't know how I heard it, perhaps from Miss Wright or from a fellow Zettagathian—that if a student went to Professor Piper's office at 10 o'clock on Saturdays the poet would be there. Presumably one arrived with a recently composed manuscript in his fist. Pipe—we all called him that, although not in his presence—had an office in the Physics Building (now MacLean Hall), long, narrow and high-ceilinged, lined with books including many with frayed paperback covers, probably fugitive. Chairs took up most of the floor space. Pipe's desk was at the far end, by the window. He was a large man, or so he seemed in such surroundings, as though he subtended most of the horizon, a looming man with roundish features.

When you came in he would take off his reading glasses and rise to make you welcome. He was a bit stooped, as though he could be more kindly if he stooped a little. Soon after 10 o'clock he would select someone and suggest that the reading begin. The author would read his piece, and it would pass from hand to hand around the circle. You were expected to comment, although no pressure was put on anyone to do so. The paper finally came back to Pipe, and after a few of these sessions I learned to marvel at his well-tempered skill. The most incompetent, timid, and breathless little freshman got some encouragement, however conventional or trivial the poem. Yet he was firm and never traduced his principles or said anything he did not mean. Before he was done, he had told the student what was wrong with the poem and what it might have been, if the young writer had the wit to comprehend Pipe's gently-phrased reservations. For years, as a teacher, I wondered how he managed to do this. Not until I reread *Barbed Wire and Wayfarers* did I understand. Pipe had the same sympathy with blundering freshmen that he had for Bindlestiff and Bill Ninetoes—"the axe, it missed the kindlingwood when he was only eight."

His audience was varied. The best of them in my day was Ruth Lechlitner; we knew she was good, but apparently Pipe saw more than we did and treated her like a fellow professional.⁹ In some ways the most engaging student was a wispy, middle-aged Chinese

⁹ She is one of the best poets that Iowa had any large part in producing. She was long the poetry reviewer for *Herald-Tribune Books* and has a half dozen volumes of excellent verse. She is living in northern California with her husband, Paul Corey. (Typescripts of several collections of her poems and plays in verse, along with letters to her from John Ciardi, J. F. Nims, William Carlos Williams, and others are presently in the manuscripts collection of The University of Iowa Libraries. *Ed.*)

gentleman, Vring Pran Ting, whose devotion to poetry was almost devout, but his effusions, at least those in English, were pretty bad. He would sit with a paper in his hand striving to be kind and yet judicious in a language he did not know well, his legs crossed, and his free foot swinging to the rhythm of the verse, his Asiatic face intent. He would always begin, "This is a nice piece of poem."

In subsequent years I was to sit under a number of the greatest scholars and teachers in the humanities—at Iowa, Columbia, Stanford, and Yale—but the best teaching I have ever experienced was that done in Pipe's office on Saturdays, ten to about noon.¹⁰

I never knew Pipe so well as I should have liked—a student readily finds himself inhibited. I talked with him about my writing and even about his, but I remember only one conversation in detail, probably because it embarrassed me for so many years. I had written a bit of verse of which I was inordinately proud. The idea was that professors are insufficiently rewarded, financially and otherwise. I can remember the beginning:

Booh! I'm a bold professor-man.
My salary is lesser than
A low-browed she hairdresser can
Comb out of you.

I thought these rhymes marvelous, and I was a little disappointed that Pipe was only moderately complimentary. Later he pointed out to me privately that what I had said was not quite true. There had been a time when teachers were poorly paid, but now a qualified professor could expect to be well rewarded. I was dashed. If I removed such lines as those that offended Pipe, my poem would be ruined, and when *Frivol*, the student humor magazine, wanted to feature my piece in their homecoming issue, I did not withdraw anything. I basked a little in my glory, but I never felt right about that poem again, and eventually I understood why—a writer should never allow himself to be trapped by his own tricks, and writing is not good if it is not honest. I thought I was truthful, but I had never learned to be as honest as Pipe was.

¹⁰ Piper was a bachelor when I knew him, but he was married soon after, to Janet Pressley, a graduate student in English. He died of a heart attack in 1939, shortly before he was to have given the Iowa commencement address. Thereby the world lost a masterpiece of its genre. (The main character in a novelette by one of his students is alleged to have been patterned after Edwin Ford Piper. See R. V. Cassill, "And In My Heart," *Paris Review* 33 (1965): 97-156. See also Harry Oster, "The Edwin Ford Piper Collection of Folksongs," *Books at Iowa* 1 (October 1964): 28-33, Ed.)

Other teachers influenced me somewhat, one of whom was Frank Luther Mott,¹¹ who taught a course in American literature. In those days, with my newspaper writing I was getting only three or four hours of sleep a night, so in class at three o'clock on a hot afternoon, I sat in the bottom row, the end seat. I would pinch my thighs until they were black and blue, but when that would work no longer, I would sit with my head on my hand, my elbow on the writing-board, as though I was gazing full at the speaker, and sleep if I had to. I developed considerable skill at this. I hope Mott never discovered my seeming discourtesy; the fault was not his. If he did, he was too much the gentleman to let me know, and I heard enough of his lectures to get an A in the course.

For me, the most exciting undergraduate lectures were those of John Towner Frederick. He returned to Iowa shortly before I graduated, and I took one course with him—all I had the opportunity to take—in modern literature at 8 o'clock a.m. I don't know how he did it; he scarcely raised his voice, but I came out of those classes sweating from emotion. Later I came to know him somewhat. He owned a farm in the cutover country of northern Michigan, and Floy and I camped there for a month or so while we were on our way to Columbia University. I remember one intimate talk. He had built *The Midland* and was still its inspiration. He had written two novels, but they were rather surprisingly thin and not selling.¹² He was at mid-life and was so disillusioned about all things creative, scholarly, or academic that if he could find a way to live, he said, he would retire and run his little farm. He was happier there than anywhere else, but he was not making much money.

I could not help him much, partly because I could not sympathize. I was myself so deeply devoted to everything academic or creative that I could not understand how one who had started so well could want to quit. But his concern was real; he never published another novel, let *The Midland* close (though I am told that

¹¹ He was the author of one good short story, coeditor of *The Midland* for a time, director of the School of Journalism, and eventually a Pulitzer prize winner for *The Magazine in America*. Never a brilliant man, he was a good solid one.

¹² I have my own theory about this. He told me how he wrote: he would choose a time when he had at least a fortnight free, would outline the proposed work, and think it through carefully. Then he would hole up and write as fast as he could make the story come, with time out only for sleep and eating, and as little as possible of those. In a week or two he would emerge with a completed manuscript, which he thought was the more honest for being one prolonged draining of his creative powers. My own guess is that what he had was a good first draft, which he could never relive sufficiently for an adequate rewrite.

BARBED WIRE
AND OTHER POEMS

BY
EDWIN FORD PIPER

THE MIDLAND PRESS
IOWA CITY, IOWA
1919

A HANDBOOK OF
SHORT STORY WRITING

BY
JOHN T. FREDERICK
Editor of The Missouri
and
Assistant Professor of English, State University of Iowa



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CAXTON

Mirror of Fifteenth-Century Letters
A STUDY OF THE LITERATURE OF
THE FIRST ENGLISH PRESS

BY
NELLIE SLAYTON AURNER, M.A., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English, University of Iowa



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*The Shadow
on the Hour*

BY RUTH LECHLITNER



The Prairie Press - Iowa City, Iowa
1956

Books by four of the authors mentioned in Charlton Laird's essay "The 'Literati' at Iowa in the Twenties."

he tried to keep it afloat with his own cash), taught a little at Northwestern and Notre Dame, wrote a good but little-used textbook, edited another, and performed various critical and editorial chores. I venerate him, but apparently I never understood him very well.¹³

The most spectacular member I knew was a lank, cadaverous, witty man whom we called Major Maulsby.¹⁴ If he was a major he must have been a most nonmilitary officer. I had the impression he spent most of his life laughing—at himself, but especially at dolts and public officials. I am not sure he would have thought there is a difference. How he became a major, if he was, nobody knew. His own story was that a general to whom he was an aide during the First World War had trouble writing sentences. So Private Maulsby wrote them, and the general, partly to keep the sentences coming and partly to keep the private's mouth shut, made him a major. But Maulsby so loved a good story that I would not hazard a guess as to the truth of this one. I later learned that he was quite unhappy. He had no doctorate, had never held an important journalistic post, and was patently not admired by the faculty. He was a superb undergraduate teacher, partly because he was so amusing and partly because he managed to make students feel that none of the most important things in the world had yet been attempted. For a time his "Good Man!" or "Good Girl!"—and his special commendation, "Goo-ood stuff!"—was for me the highest award known to man.

Maulsby spent as much time as he could spare trying to write stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which he considered the ultimate accolade. He never made the *Post*, and eventually—I gathered in some chagrin—took a more lucrative post at the University of Pittsburgh. Even at that time I was beginning to wonder why anyone as smart as he was could fail to know that the scholar whose ideal is *PMLA* [*Publications of the Modern Language Association*] cannot be expected to take much account of the *Post*. I never found the answer.

¹³ He helped young writers in numberless ways. One was to bring creative people to the campus—Ruth Suckow and Robert Frost were among them—and after their public appearance, invite them to his home, where various students also had been convened. Sitting on the floor and chatting with Robert Frost—what better than that could happen to a prospective writer! (See Sargent Bush, Jr., "The Achievement of John T. Frederick," *Books at Iowa* 14 (April 1971): 8-23, 27-30. Also Milton M. Riegelman, *The Midland: A Venture in Literary Regionalism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975. Ed.)

¹⁴ His full name was William Shipman Maulsby (1890-1976). He published at least one book, *Getting the News* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925), engaging but hard to teach. I surmise the students liked a pedestrian book, and the Major was not pedestrian.

Two of the finest teachers in English I did not encounter until graduate school, where my wife and I had Old English from Nellie Slayton Aurner and *Beowulf* with Henning Larsen and others. Seldom have careful scholarship and womanly charm been so delightfully combined as in Mrs. Aurner. Partly to amuse her, my wife and I used part of the Christmas vacation to rewrite the conventional biography of the supposed first English poet, in Old English. In the Venerable Bede's account, an ignorant herdsman was visited by an angel who miraculously gave him the powers of song, but in our version, the angel, as seen through the mists of too much mead, was in reality a venerable buck sheep. We thought this very funny, and Mrs. Aurner was polite, but I became aware that she thought we might have used a precious vacation to better advantage. She was herself the author of a book on William Caxton, the best book then available.

Larsen was a joy to know. He was a big shouldered, genial Scandinavian-American with a splendid foundation in comparative philology. When an interesting word came up, he would fill the blackboard, deriving the term and its relatives from Indo-European.

One of my last encounters with him came the day after my oral examination for the master's degree. When he walked into class, he stopped and stared at me. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his great voice rumbling like a pipe organ. "You passed your examination yesterday."

"If I didn't learn anything before the examination maybe I can learn something after," I replied. Larsen's booming laughter could be heard all down the hallway.

At least two professors of English I should have known but did not, Sam B. (Sammy) Sloan and Elbert N. S. Thompson. Sammy was the best-known English teacher on the campus; everybody took his course in the English novel and students I respected admired it. He discussed all major English novelists and all major works, and provided well-digested criticisms of everything. I stayed away from his class partly because I had become disillusioned with the traditional lecture method. To quote a witticism I picked up somewhere: the lecture method is that method whereby the notes of the instructor become the notes of the student without passing through the brains of either.¹⁵ For Thompson I have no such plausible ex-

¹⁵ I had some reason for my disdain. At least some students emerged with the notion that they now knew all that anybody need know about novels, and they would never have to read another.

cuse. I had not yet learned to appreciate Milton—Thompson's specialty—nor to discover the charm of so unpretentious a scholar as Thompson. Later, I was ashamed of myself. I tried not to be the swine before whom pearls are cast, but not for some time did I learn what jewels were cultured under Tommy's gentle care. I have had to learn that not always was I a perceptive young man.¹⁶

Craig's regime at Iowa was distinguished by European scholars who would be brought in as adornments for the summer. B. Ifor Evans rises readily to mind. He and the others were an experience for us and for the whole academic community, usually well chosen and brilliant—all except one, who horrified both the students and the faculty by spending his time promoting an idea he had espoused: Milton was a madman, enamored of the night. I am indebted to him. He filled in on my examining committee, where he asked a question obviously intended to elicit his own views. I was in a quandary. Should I ignore his ridiculous notions, maybe turn my examination into scholarly bickering, and lose his vote? Or should I advance his views and lose everybody else? I decided to play it straight, and began, "The content of the course was . . ." He kept saying "Yes, yes. Yes, yes," as I mouthed his words back to him, and I could see the remainder of the committee almost visibly smirking. I was treating a guest of the University with courtesy, while making clear that his theories were nonsense. He did more to pass my examination for me than I could have.

Among the bringers of revolution—academic revolution—was Edward C. Mabie. He arrived from somewhere in the East,¹⁷ to cry in the wilderness that the American star system was thwarting the American hunger for art on the stage. He knew about the Moscow Art Theatre, and he promoted it with a vigor that made Iowa one of the leaders in the collegiate theatrical movement. He was himself an excellent director, dynamic and devoted, and he instilled zeal into others. The word got around that being on one of Mabie's casts was an experience not to be missed. I had the experience, and I was never the same again, but on one occasion I was also the unwitting instrument of his embarrassment. He had said that a good makeup man can transform anybody into whatever character is desired. By way of setting himself the ultimate in improbability, he picked me out of the class and said he would remake me into Shylock. Of

¹⁶ Thompson was celebrated with an issue of *Philological Quarterly* (January 1949).

¹⁷ He had studied at Dartmouth and had good teaching experience.

course I could not see what he did, but he worked till he sweated, and when the bell stopped him after fifty minutes he was still sweating and still unhappy with the results. He said he could do it, given another hour, but he added, "The trouble is, he just has a comedy face." The difficulty, I assume, was partly that my upturned Nixonian nose did not readily Semitize.

A few professors in various departments gave courses so relevant for literature that the "young literati" thought of them as "English."¹⁸ Perhaps the most notable was G. T. W. Patrick who taught "Introduction to Philosophy." He had just published a textbook in the field, a good one, and we hung on his words. I did only moderately well with him, partly because I was so indiscreet as to try to impress him by reporting for my term paper on Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*) read in the original. I did not do very well for at least two reasons: neither my knowledge of German nor my understanding of Kant was good enough. The best story I know about Patrick comes from a colleague, Philip Greeley Clapp, long director of the School of Music, who happened to sit in on the doctoral examination of one of Patrick's candidates. The professor was quizzing the young man very closely. He would ask a question, while taking some sort of note on a paper before him, shut his eyes while the student replied and he continued to use his note pad. When the student had finished, Patrick would open his eyes, glance at his notes, and ask another question.

This Socratic technique was curious enough so that, after a break, Clapp changed his seat where he could see the notes the examiner was taking. While Patrick was asking his question he would also be sketching a donkey on his scratch pad. While the student was attempting to answer, Patrick would close his eyes, and try to draw a tail on the donkey. When the student had finished, the professor would open his eyes, check the accuracy of the tail's position, and while he sketched another donkey he would be asking another question. Apparently Patrick had trouble keeping his mind busy.

Clapp himself should not be overlooked, although I did not know him well. He was a pianist, conductor, composer, and writer on musicology, and was well enough known that, when the Juilliard School of Music was being planned, Clapp was one of three—along with Leonard Bernstein and one other—to set up the program. He offered a course in music appreciation, for majors and graduate stu-

¹⁸ An excellent one, from which I profited too little, offered Latin and Greek.

dents, in which he played the examples himself, most of them without music, even sonata-length pieces. The students were expected to write criticisms. I could do no such thing, but on the pleas of Alice Ingham, I was admitted and allowed to write what I pleased. Clapp himself was a delight, witty, artistic, and learned. He even liked a good pun and called his course—doubtless “The Romantic Composers” in the Schedule of Courses—“The Three Shoes,” that is, Schumann, Schubert, and Shoe-Pang (Chopin).

I mention the course the more readily because it suggests one of the rewards of Iowa: it was the sort of place where things could be expected to happen. I had barely completed Clapp’s course when I received a message from one Ernest Harold Wilcox, inviting me to his office. He had been reading papers for Clapp’s course and had been impressed with my verse—some of my comments on Clapp’s playing had taken that form. Wilcox pointed out that there was no American opera—Edna St. Vincent Millay had not yet published her libretto, *The King’s Henchman*. He had some ideas as to what the new opera should be. Why did we not together invent it; I writing the book and lyrics, and he setting them to music? Nothing much came of this venture, but the whole attempt was characteristic.¹⁹

One of the most distinguished figures of my day was Dr. Carl E. Seashore (the name a deliberate translation of “Sjostrand”), long dean of the graduate school. My best tale about him is not significant, except for the well-known truism that persons who labor in their brains may be absentminded. According to the yarn—and I cannot verify it²⁰—Seashore on this occasion was to lead the commencement parade. In those days the leading marchers formed by the south door of the Library (Macbride Hall) and followed a walk

¹⁹ Just for the record, I did write a short opera, based on an incident during our honeymoon, involving the corrupt Chicago police. I still like a few lyrics in it, but it was pretty juvenile. Wilcox, who took over as director in Clapp’s absence, never found time to write the score, and later left academic life. After some years my manuscript provided a basis for a score by a graduate student, who was given a creative master’s degree for his production of the opera, utilizing the University orchestra and choir. I was invited, but felt too poor and too loaded with teaching to attend. I wish now I had managed to do so. Meanwhile I had started another opera based on American folk themes like “Oh, Susannah,” but never finished it. I kept in touch with Wilcox and we started a few other projects. In one, I recall, I was to translate some Italian songs which Wilcox expected to arrange, but he was having marital troubles, and nothing came of that either.

²⁰ If the yarn is folklore it is the more significant; many undergraduates wanted it to be true. I can say only that as a reporter I had to work with Seashore and found him a good news source, helpful, and understanding. (See *Dictionary of American Biography*, supp. 4, s.v. “Seashore, Carl Emil.” Ed.)

that led south toward the Liberal Arts Building (Schaeffer Hall). Seashore started out all right, but midway toward the Liberal Arts Building he needed to turn left. He must have made that trip hundreds of times through the years, going to the Liberal Arts Building from the Library, no doubt pondering problems in research or administration. For whatever reason, this time he did not make the crucial turn, but continued on to the Liberal Arts portal, while the long serpent of the parade followed after him. Inside the building, he took the right set of stairs, and at the second floor another stairway to the third floor. He then turned down a hallway to the psychology office, greeted his somewhat startled secretary, entered his private office, and sat down. He heard a strange noise and glanced up to find the whole commencement parade pouring in on him. I never heard how they got that mess straightened out, the halls and stairways jammed with black-robed students and faculty, but I assume they must have.

In some ways the best academic bargain I got as an undergraduate was a two-credit course in geology. The instructor did not have a reputation as a research scientist, and probably for that reason I understand he was not much treasured by the administration. But he made his subject so omnipresent and human that I have had fun with it ever since, spotting nonconformities, hanging valleys, and other phenomena out of the car window.

As an incident to my journalistic way of making a living, I witnessed a quiet tragedy, not in English but in a closely related department. Among the fixtures at Iowa was Charles H. Weller, who had a doctorate from Harvard in classical archaeology. But there were not many jobs for archaeologists—Iowa was sponsoring no digs in Greece. Weller was brilliant, and I imagine desperate. He had to do something to justify a salary. He taught a course in the history of art, but that was only four credits. He ran the summer session, the University Extension, the university public relations, and I don't know what else—in this last capacity he was my boss as university news editor. And now, almost simultaneously, three things happened: the journalism department was elevated into a school and he was made head; he contracted a rare and very painful disease; and he was offered the presidency of Boston University.

I remember him at this time. As part of his efforts to get the Iowa School of Journalism established as a leader in the field, he had organized a state journalistic society and was running it by keeping himself inconspicuous. The occasion was the foundation banquet, and Weller and I were sitting at the back of the hall. I

complimented him on his adroitness. He was modest, but he was also a little flushed. Those were prohibition days, and I fancy some of the publishers had their private bootleggers. "You know how I did it?" he asked.

Clearly he wanted an audience. Any old kind of audience, even a naive novice. I said I didn't know, and he said something like the following: "I've been able to get almost anything I wanted, here and elsewhere. I observed that most people squander their lives working for things that don't really matter to them. So I deliberately fought only for what was worth fighting for. On a committee, for instance, I would let everybody beat me on all the minor issues. Then, when I fought for something, I could almost always win. Everybody thought I should be allowed to win sometimes. Actually I could win any time. Whenever winning was worth it."

He seemed to want me to remember his formula for success. I did, although I have never been the calculating person who could use it much. A few days later I saw the letter in which he declined the Boston offer, mentioning his uncertain health. A few months later he was dead.

Now to the students, who are harder to evaluate because their doings are less planned and scheduled. At Iowa some order is given to their activities by observing two catalysts, Professor Piper and what were called the "literary societies." I shall turn to the second. They were called "literary," and they may once have been, though in my day they were not literary at all, but were occupied with public declamation. They must have been a heritage from the nineteenth century and, I presume, of the eastern liberal arts college. They were obviously moribund, but victims do not always recognize their own moribundity, and we did not. With each new crop of freshmen we hoped to do a little better, but did worse. The societies occupied the second floor of the architectural anachronism called Close Hall, at the corner of Dubuque Street and Iowa Avenue. When the administration turned Close Hall into the newly formed School of Journalism, the literary societies quietly wasted away.

I have seen the statement in print that there were nine of these societies, but in my time only six remained—three for men (Zeta-gathian, Irving, and Philomathian), and three for women, loosely associated with the male groups and not very active.²¹ The best

²¹ I remember the name of only one, Octave Thanet (the pen name of Alice French), and that probably because I married one of their members, Floy Davis. Floy and I once called on Miss French; she entertained us cordially, but she was then nearing eighty, and obviously not living much in this world.

training in oral use of the language that I had at Iowa came from my fellow Zetagathians.

As part of the initiation, the novices had to deliver some sort of original composition before the assembled members. I did not expect to be terrified—I had spoken in public frequently in high school—but I was. I had not known that one's knees can knock together, seemingly of their own will, but they did—wham, wham! I tried to hide them behind the podium, but there was not room, and I said something. Everybody laughed. I didn't know why then, and I don't now, but those were the days of the Volstead Act, and whenever liquor is illegal it becomes funny. I had intended to compare some current program to the unpopularity of prohibition. I made another remark; people laughed even louder. I realized I had hit on a good thing—whatever it was—and kept going. People kept laughing. When I ran out of cracks I thought might be funny—my knees had stopped whamming each other by then—I tossed in a couple of sentences of the speech I had intended to give, and sat down. To my surprise I was a sensation; the audience was convinced that I was a clever and witty fellow who knew how to intrigue his listeners—they thought my knees knocking and my obvious terror were all part of an act I had planned—and when I had the audience prepared, socked them with my moral.

I had no such intention and no such awareness of what was going on, but I am sure that subsequently I rose to challenges as I might not have, if I had not seen that everybody expected me to do better than I was likely to. And once a freshman was established as somebody who might grow up to the pace of college forensics, the older Zetagathians, including advanced law students, would turn to and tutor him. With their help I won a few contests, including a place on a university debate squad and first in the State Peace oratorical affair. I spent the prize money for this last event on rings for my intended; I liked the implications of my peace money going for matrimony.

I must have been one of the last Zetagathian presidents.²² I did not recognize that I was officiating at the demise of an ancient and honorable institution, but apparently I was. The literary societies were still quite a power on the campus in my day. They helped make forensics and drama important at Iowa. If the societies did not

²² Paul Corey says that an old-timer told him you could always recognize a Zetagathian because he wore no socks. In my time, although many of us were inclined to be threadbare, we were less picturesque.

themselves do much for literature, they brought students together who had literary leanings, who would then graduate to Pipe's Saturday seminars, and form their own groups.²³

During my years of teaching I have been forced repeatedly to notice that in the arts, including the literary arts, the number of starters is high, but the number of achievers is very low. Sometimes there are specific reasons, but more frequently these zealous young people just quit, gradually. They are busy with families and jobs, but they were busy in college, too. Many of them seem just to lose the agility of mind that would urge them to write poetry while selling insurance.

Iowa was a small university in those days—the administration was overwhelmed when 4,500 students registered—but we were active enough to float two publications, the *Iowa Literary Magazine*, which produced several issues beginning in 1924, and *Kinnikinnick*, which published work done in Piper's informal seminar, 1925-28. There were more than 100 contributors, and nothing like that was done again at Iowa for some time. They were bright people, but even so, not many attracted any wide attention.

I can mention only a few. Paul Corey was unusually productive; he wrote short stories and published four serious novels, beginning with *Three Miles Square* (1939), all set in the farm country near Atlantic.²⁴ When the novels stopped selling he turned to other genre—whodunits, how-tos, and eventually books about cats. His wife, Ruth Lechlitner, stuck stubbornly to poetry.

Perhaps the best writer and a modest, gentle person was Buel Beems, who published under the name Griffith Beems. He and I roomed together until he went to law school at Harvard. He had graduated and was practicing law in New York when his father died, and he felt obliged to return and run the family business, educa-

²³ I was involved in several of these. I remember one of them became self-conscious because we were not fighting the administration. We thought of ourselves as young radicals, but we had nothing to fight about and thought we should. One of our members assured us that the library censored books and had a locked shelf. Now, there was an abuse to disapprove. We didn't know what books were under lock and key, but we heard that Rémy de Gourmont was. Accordingly we looked him up in the card catalogue and each of us selected a title and put in a slip for the book. We got them, with speedy indifference, but they were all in French. None of us could read enough French to know what was salacious and what was not. That was the end of the Great Revolt.

²⁴ The others were *The Road Returns* (1940), *County Seat* (1941), and *Acres of Antaeus* (1946). (See Robert A. McCown, "Paul Corey's Mantz Trilogy," *Books at Iowa* 17 (November 1972): 15-19, 23-26. Ed.)

tional distributing from Cedar Rapids. He postponed the writing. When he retired, he started writing again, but died of Parkinson's disease after much pain. He had a mind like a sword and an appealing generosity.

The least explicable may have been Charles Edwin ("Eddie") Baker. He was very dark, with startling black and bushy hair, rather small but solidly built. He moved as though he were geared to the earth and knew exactly how to make the universe run. If a declamation contest was announced we assumed that Eddie would probably win it—if he could get his speech ready in time. Usually he did not. While the rest of us were orating, Eddie would be out in the hall trying to finish his speech. He would forget it, make a mess of his presentation, and either Buel or I would come in first. When Buel went to Harvard, I asked Eddie, a delightfully ebullient person, to room with me. The Department of Psychology recognized his genius and made him a teaching assistant, and since he had no money this seemed to offer him salvation. But suddenly he became irresponsible. I would come home from my 8 o'clock class to find him asleep, having already missed a section or two of his teaching. I would try to get him up. He would sit, black-haloed and unshaved, gesturing from the bed while inundating me with quotations from Shelley. Of course the administration had to let him go at midyear. He vanished, and so far as I know, stopped writing, but sometime later he was a research assistant in New York. He died relatively young.

Equally amazing was Edward Douglas Branch, a lively little man, perhaps the most startling creature who ever stalked out of Texas, if a physically inept person of five feet or so can be said to stalk. He affected huge cigars and white spats, possibly the only pair in active service in the state of Iowa, and wore blue serge suits that flapped about his spindling legs and arms. Branch swung a knob-headed cane, the sort, I take it, that used to be intended to punish poltroons. He had long willowy fingers, so supple one wondered if he had bones in them. He spoke with loving precision, dawdling over the consonants, and he was apparently conversant with everything. He bowled us over. In early encounters Branch seemed tremendously learned, even brilliant, but I noted in time that if one pursued a question he would change the subject. Still, he wrote with distinction, and his research was good. His master's thesis, *The Cowboy and His Interpreters* (1926), was published as a commercial book, a triumph almost unheard of. He got a research appointment—at Pittsburgh, if I remember correctly—and published

three other books,²⁵ highly readable and stimulating. But Branch seemed not to be employable; he lost job after job, experienced two disastrous marriages, and took to drink. But that was later; he was always sober if not always supplied with cash when he came to see me, as he did occasionally. He died in middle age.

Another who vanished from my ken was John Byron Long, who wrote some exciting verse and for a time edited a literary column.

On the whole we were a healthy lot—Iowa kids, mostly from small towns, the products of farms going more usually to the Ames or Cedar Falls campuses. And we probably would have been called “wholesome.” The girls got married if they could and taught if they couldn’t, and the men went into business or the professions, law and journalism notably. But as I now look back I realize that a number committed suicide, mostly shortly after leaving campus. They included Lowell Otte (better known as All-Western end); my wife, Floy Davis; Harry Stevenson, a successful young lawyer; and a highly intelligent young man who was understood to be engaged to Alice Ingham. Alice, after writing a modest number of good lyrics, along with some music that Clapp praised, died young and rather inexplicably, having married Professor Harold Whitehall of Indiana University. They met as graduate students at Iowa. Charles Brown Nelson, one of the most genial of men, a promising poet and editor for a New York art gallery, died after an unsuccessful operation.

The figure who was at Iowa in those days, and who later was to make the biggest splash in the world, was George Horace Gallup, for a time editor of the *Daily Iowan*. He was familiar with the English crowd but moved more with the journalists and the psychologists. Likewise, Marquis Childs, the journalist, was there, but I have the impression he had better things to do than to mingle much with undergraduates. Allen Walker Read, one of the most distinguished students of American English, started his graduate work at Iowa but transferred to Oxford when he won a Rhodes scholarship there. Charles Burns was probably responsible for more publishing than anyone else. He became a New York editor for *Newsweek* and a number of other magazines, and when he got ulcers turned to private editorial consulting.

²⁵ *The Hunting of the Buffalo* (New York: Appleton, 1929), *Westward: The Romance of the American Frontier* (New York: Appleton, 1938), and *The Sentimental Years* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1947). (See J. Frank Dobie, “E. Douglas Branch, Singularisimo.” *Southwest Review* 47, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 109-118. Ed.)

More typical was Evelyn Harter Glick. She became involved in New York publishing, directed the processes by which hundreds of manuscripts became printed books, raised two fine boys, and wrote at least one novel that almost made it. She preserved a love of letters and language, which had been cultivated at Iowa, and she survived by activities related to literature—even Robert Frost lectured and raised apples, and Faulkner bred mules.²⁶

²⁶ Here are a few more names of people I have not mentioned elsewhere—of some I have mainly lost track: H. Don Ambler; Pauline Patton Graham; Norman W. Macleod, a zealous young man; Mary Fletcher Finlayson, much more sophisticated than most of us; Frances Baker, Eddie's sister; Ilse M. Smith, a gentle, artistic girl; Lee Weber, who worked for Doubleday; Velma Critz, who went into journalism; Marjorie Laird, who became a school principal; E. Lee Fuller, in business in Chicago; Paul M. Dwyer, recently dead after a distinguished career in law; Iduna Bertel Field, who brought up a creative family and never lost her lively interest in poetry; Iduna's sister-in-law, Julia Field; Baird Mid-daugh, who ran used bookstores; Warren L. Van Dine, who carried with him the marks of his years at Iowa, and as an old man reported that he lived "surrounded by a thousand books, and numerous small items by way of antiques and beautiful things"; Mildred Wirt Benson, a great writer of mysteries for children; and Wendell Johnson, who wrote several books, including a best-seller, on stuttering. (See Dorothy Moeller, "Wendell Johnson: The Addiction to Wonder," *Books at Iowa* 20 (April 1974): 3-23. *Ed.*)