

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
JAMES A. MICHENER**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for James A. Michener, Professor Emeritus, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM
JAMES A. MICHENER**

James Albert Michener was born on February 3, 1907, in New York. As a foundling, he was given to the care of a woman named Mabel Michener in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. She gave him her name and he remained part of her household in his childhood and adolescent years. Throughout his life, he looked back with great affection and gratitude to Mrs. Michener, whose principles and fortitude he admired and often emulated.

As a young man he earned a scholarship to Swarthmore College, from which he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1929. He earned a master's degree at the University of Northern Colorado in 1937, and intermittently over the years, spent time as a graduate student or doing research at half-a-dozen universities in this country, in Britain, and elsewhere. He held teaching jobs in various institutions in the late 1930s and then served as an associate editor at Macmillan from 1941 to 1949, with an interruption for several years of naval service in the Pacific during the War.

His experience in the Pacific led to his first book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, published in 1947. It won the Pulitzer Prize and served as the basis for a monumentally successful Broadway musical. Thus Michener's first novel was not published until he was forty years of age, but it set the tone and the precedent for a career as a writer, which he pursued with unflinching vigor and success for the rest of his life. His output was prodigious. By our count, he was the author of some forty-three books, though there may be a few we have missed. Most of them were novels, but there were other books as well — on sports, on politics, on travel, on geography, and on social analysis. And, with all of that, Michener never liked to be called an author. He always said the term "author" suggested somebody who was living on his dignity on some lofty plateau. He said a man who made his living by writing should be called a writer.

Michener was a great teller of tales, although his stories were always based on thorough and meticulous research. When he began a new book, he read everything he could find on the subject and then invented characters to represent people important in the history of the area he was writing about. He did have helpers from time to time, but, as many were surprised to learn, he did all the writing himself. The assistants pursued ideas and places, and explored possibilities. But the writer of Michener's books was Michener.

One quality that marked his literary image was that his books were often very long. Beginning perhaps with *Hawaii* in 1959, he established a pattern by which his fictional accounts of an area began far back in the origins, even the geological origins, of the place. Indeed, one of his books actually began with the phrase, "Some five billion years ago . . ." No doubt that historical reach helped explain the length of some of his books. Michener traveled far, in space as in time, and he wrote about most of the places he visited. As one wag has said, pretty soon we will hear from somebody up there who has seen the page proofs of a new 1,000-page novel called *Heaven* by James A. Michener.

The man who really prompted Michener's move to Texas was Governor Bill Clements. Some time in 1982 he invited Michener to visit him in Virginia, where Clements was living while serving as Deputy Secretary of Defense. They talked about Michener's plans for the future, and Clements urged him to move to Austin and write a book about Texas. Michener agreed.

The University welcomed him to its midst, found him a house and an office, arranged for a couple of graduate students in history to serve as research assistants, and got him appointed to the faculty — as Jack Taylor Professor Emeritus. The only man in our history whose first appointment was as Professor Emeritus. Rather curious.

He started work on his *Texas* novel in his customary fashion. He met hundreds of people, read dozens of books, traveled to every corner of the state, made friends with scores of Texans, and when he started the writing, he did it with the same rigorous discipline that he had always employed. Every morning at 7:30 he sat down at his typewriter and stayed there until midday. He would write, re-write, edit, and write again (he always scoffed at writers who said they never revised what they first wrote), and then take a break for lunch and perhaps a short nap. His afternoons were spent reading, talking, walking, traveling, attending functions, and experiencing life. He had an endless curiosity, a boundless energy, and a prodigious memory. He never forgot what he learned about the things that interested him — and he was interested in everything.

In the course of his life, Jim Michener devoted a great deal of time to public service. In 1962, he ran for Congress as a Democratic candidate, but lost in a tough race in a traditionally Republican district. In 1968, he served as Secretary of the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention. In 1979-1983 he was a member of the Advisory Council of NASA. In 1978-1987, he served on the Stamp Selection Committee of the U.S. Postal Service. He testified several times before Congressional committees. In 1983, he was appointed to the governing board of Radio Free Europe, which he served with enthusiasm and effectiveness for more than a decade. And in 1977, President Carter bestowed upon him the United States Presidential Medal of Freedom.

He touched The University of Texas in all sorts of ways, and supported it with zest and enthusiasm, not only by writing a book about Texas, but by becoming an active member of the University community, by providing funds for the purchase of art, by creating professional fellowships at the UT Press, by donating an enormous collection of modern American art, by contributing millions of dollars to the creation of the new art museum, and by inspiring and funding a professional writing program called the Texas Center for Writers, which, upon his death, was renamed the Michener Center for Writers.

In all of this, it should be said, Michener was the central figure of a team. One other member of that team was his long-time associate John Kings, who assisted him in all sorts of ways, public and private, personal and professional. The other member of that team was Mari, his well-loved wife of many years. They went everywhere together, they celebrated everything together, they collected art together, and she was a figure of inestimable importance in Michener's life. She provided the setting in which he could do his work, she protected him when he needed protecting, and she goaded him when he needed goading — just as he curbed her when she needed curbing. Each gave first place to the other, and they called each other "Cookie."

Michener believed very strongly in the values of education, and to support them was a major purpose in his life. He pursued that purpose in many places and in many ways. He taught in schools and in universities, and he shared with them what he always considered his lucky and astonishing financial success. But he pursued that educational purpose in his books as well, for in them he was as much the teacher as he was the teller of tales.

In the telling of his tales, Michener always made clear his own feeling for the oppressed and the hard-pressed. In many of his novels — in *South Pacific*, in *Hawaii*, in *Texas*, in *The Covenant*, in *Sayonara*, and in others — his sympathy for the underdog is made clear, and his outrage at the injustice imposed upon one people by another became a kind of hallmark of his literary effort. As a writer and as a human being, Michener was a liberal in the finest sense of that fine old term. He believed in liberty, in law, and in human rights, and in many of his tales he made that concern a central theme.

His books overflowed with history and with characters representative of the times and places of which he wrote, and his stories were always gripping. He is remembered, however, not as a stylist, but a writer of straightforward, sometimes dogged, prose, and an inventor of ingenious plot lines. To the surprise of nearly everyone, he emerged in his last years as something of a closet poet. On the stage, at his 90th birthday celebration in 1997, there was announced the publication of a book of one hundred sonnets, and quite elegant sonnets they were. *A Century of Sonnets* it was called, and it too was received with acclaim.

In 1992, Michener published a personal memoir called *The World is My Home*, but the dust jacket shows him looking out over the hills of Austin from the top of Mount Bonnell. In an important sense, the world was indeed his home. He visited all seven continents and wrote about all of them except Australia and Antarctica. And of the seven seas, he sailed every one. But if the world was his home, Austin was his residence, and The University of Texas was his place of business. He enjoyed being part of the University, and he took great pride in its art collections, its Press, and its Center for Writers.

In his last months, Michener suffered a variety of bodily impairments — a bad heart, a bum knee, and a failed kidney which required unremitting dialysis. He suffered them bravely and with continued good humor, but the old body finally gave out, and when he died on October 16, 1997, the University was saddened and the world of contemporary literature was diminished. He was mourned at memorial services in Austin, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and New York. He was cremated and the ashes placed next to those of his wife in the Austin Memorial Park.

His mark on The University of Texas was deep and permanent. As faculty and students, we enjoyed him and were proud to have him among us. In 1991, President William H. Cunningham bestowed upon him a Presidential Citation, the University's highest honor. Dr. Cunningham described him as "not only a preeminent author," but also as "a profound and ardent spokesman for the liberal arts and for liberal education." Above all, he said, Jim Michener had "a vast yearning to leave the world a better place than he found it." And that is what he did.

Dear friend and colleague, *requiesce in pace*.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors William S. Livingston (chair), John A. Kings, James L. Magnuson, and Elspeth D. Rostow.

Distributed to the the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on February 21, 2000. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>