IN MEMORIAM

WALTER POWELL STEWART

Walter Powell Stewart was born in Norwood, Ohio, on April 16, 1907. He attended public schools in Cincinnati, from which he graduated in 1924. Of curious mind and an avid reader, he elected to attend Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where he received a liberal arts education, graduating cum laude in 1925. The following year he enrolled in Harvard, where among other courses, he studied Shakespeare under the great Kittredge and received his M.A. degree in 1929.

Imbued with the love of literature, he then sought a teaching position in a college or university. He was happy to be offered an instructorship in English at The University of Texas, located in Austin. The University of Texas was then a growing provincial university of some six thousand students, housed in some half dozen or so "permanent" buildings and a score or more temporary World War I "shacks". It had yet to be affected by the vast flow of Texas oil, initially discovered in 1923 on two million acres of semi-arid land owned in West Texas by the University and was as yet far from its present status as a world-class university.

Stewart's hopes of imparting his love of literature to eager students was temporized by reality. A majority of the students entering The University of Texas were badly educated in the basic skills of reading and writing; therefore the University required them to take two semesters of Freshman English devoted to these skills and two semesters of Sophomore English, in Stewart's early years devoted to the study of English Literature, mostly poetry, but later broadened to Western Literature and World Literature. The teaching schedule of a new instructor was usually two classes of Freshman English and two classes of Sophomore English each semester with an enrollment of approximately 120 students. Such would be Stewart's assignment for a number of years.
The work of teaching Freshman English—mainly composition, with weekly themes to grade—was principally carried out by instructors and tutors (later called teaching assistants). Most would have M.A. degrees but would be expected to obtain Ph.D.’s if they hoped to be retained. In addition, those who hoped to be retained were expected to be publishing scholars. All of this Stewart came to understand and after a short delay began enrolling in a graduate course in the Department of English each semester, aiming at a Ph.D.

Only a man of great energy could have done all that he did in his early years at the University. In addition to full-time teaching and pursuing the Ph.D. degree, he published an article on Shakespeare in Texas Studies in 1932, and in 1934 published with Michael Bradshaw a 300-page book, A Goodly Company: A Guide to Parallel Reading, which he hoped would interest undergraduate students in further reading. In March 1938 he delivered a public lecture on John Dryden and at about the same time had three additional articles in contemplation.

The operation of large departments like English is carried on by the chairman and a host of committees. Stewart early became known as a good committee man—willing and able. Records from 1934-1942 show him serving on 8 committees, of which he was chairman of 4. Though the University had no promotional policy at the time and though the wheels of administration ground exceedingly slowly, Stewart was advanced to the rank of assistant professor at a salary of $2400. This promotion coincided with the entry of the U.S. into World War II. Stewart was among the volunteers from the faculty.

He was inducted in June 1942, and after Officer Training School in Miami and Bombardier School in San Marcos, he was assigned to the Childress Air Force Base. There he would serve successively as Ground School Instructor, Assistant Director, and Ground School Director, responsible for the content and quality of instruction in all classes at the base. He was discharged with the rank of captain in October 1945. During his service he had written 27 “Outlines” which the Air Force regarded as publications and classified as Restricted or Confidential; he had also won several citations, and his work throughout had been graded as “superior.”

Returning to the University, he took up where he had left off, continuing a heavy teaching load, which now, however, included one or more advanced courses, the numerous committee assignments, and scholarly interest
in certain eighteenth century writers and bibliography which he developed while studying under the influence of Professor R. H. Griffith, bibliographer of Alexander Pope. Subsequently under that influence Stewart published British Newspapers and Periodicals, 1632-1800, U.T. Press, 1950, and an Index of British Newspapers and Periodicals for 1700 (Readex Microprint, 1956 (550 pp.), as well as articles on several 18th-century writers and periodicals.

Although he had given proof of scholarly interest and competence and was promoted to the tenure rank of associate professor in 1952 (and to the rank of professor in 1959 and to the rank of professor of English and Education in 1966), Stewart did not find his accomplishments satisfying. From the beginning his primary interest had been in the student, and the connection between 17th-century newspapers and the undergraduate student was tenuous indeed, and it was only natural that he should be easily inducted into the Ready Writers Contest and other programs conducted by the Interscholastic League in the College of Education. Indeed, in addition to developing other advanced courses and continuing his heavy committee work, including a term as Director of Freshman English, this new interest was to become a consuming one. In 1956, for example, as State Director of the Ready Writers Contest for the Interscholastic League he had begun working with the public schools on their language programs and delivered as many as six public lectures a year at Interscholastic League conferences. Here was a way in which Stewart could help students directly to improve their reading and writing skills and indirectly by teaching their high-school teachers how to better their own teaching of those skills.

Here in this work only tangential to his contractual work Stewart found satisfaction. He was not only teaching students to be better readers and writers, he was also teaching teachers to be better teachers of reading and writing. As his reputation increased, he was in great demand as public speaker or director of the many conferences and training sessions that sprang up devoted to reading and writing all over the state. In addition, he wrote a 16-page booklet entitled The Ready Writers Handbook, 10,000 copies of which the Interscholastic League purveyed, and produced a series of 16 TV programs for in-service training of high-school English teachers and thousands of high-school students interested in writing. In the course of this work over the years he estimated that he had traveled some 20,000 to 30,000 miles, usually by car, and had participated in hundreds of conferences, seminars, and training
sessions. On these many and lengthy trips Powell was “a valuable resource to new faculty on the tour, a very pleasant traveling companion, and a great inspiration to the students and high school teachers,” says Dr. James Kinneavy, who took over the Ready Writing program shortly after Stewart relinquished it.

Today the Ready Writers contest is one of the largest extemporaneous state writing contests in the country. Nearly every high school in the state has a Ready Writers Club, and about 1500 students each year participate in the district contests. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been given to students in scholarships through the program. Stewart’s criteria for judging the essays have been retained for the past thirty years in the handbook which Stewart wrote, although it has gone through many subsequent editions.

And with what result? Although he had been promoted, first, to Professor and then to Professor of English and Education, he had worn himself out, he had received no financial reward for his extra activities, and he could only conclude that the administration regarded him as one of its mediocrities. He must have communicated this feeling to his chairman, Dr. Megaw, who in turn passed it on to Dean Silber and requested a special leave of absence, with pay, for Dr. Stewart. Though denying that he regarded Stewart as a mediocrity, Silber conceded that “Professor Stewart’s contribution to the high schools of this state is unmatched by any other member of the English Department and possibly by any other English professor in Texas” and added “I need not point out to you that when a man has contributed as much as Powell Stewart has to the teaching of English in the high schools, he has also contributed substantially to the level of English instruction at the University of Texas.”

But the answer was no--as beyond his powers to grant--and he could only suggest the weak alternative that Stewart propose a scholarly research subject to the Graduate Council, and if it were approved, he would receive a semester’s leave in which to work on it. To Stewart this was the rejection of much of his life’s work. On May 31, 1970, he submitted his official intention to take early retirement. The Department of English recommended that he be appointed Professor Emeritus, and this recommendation was approved in due course by Dean Silber, the President, and the Board of Regents.
In retirement Stewart devoted himself to his wife of almost fifty years, Mary McKee Stewart, to his son Bruce and family, and to his several hobbies, which included reading, travel, sailing, a study of salt water fish, of which he had a small aquarium, playing his violin in a friendly quartette, and to his modest investments in mutual funds, which he charted so carefully that he outmatched many professionals.

His last days were marred by illness that limited his activities, and he died in Austin on February 19, 1990.

Robert M. Berdahl, President
The University of Texas at Austin

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee of Professors C. L. Cline (Chair), James L. Kinneavy, and Maurine D. McElroy.