

JOHN RICHARDSON MILLER

1890 – 1966

A Saturday afternoon in early May. The elms and maples of a former Raymond Avenue cast their shadows across a crusty two-lane highway. Professors and their wives are out of doors, rakes or hoes in hand, clearing the debris of a long Poughkeepsie winter.

Suddenly, one is aware of an approaching figure--tall, slim, distinguished, and correct; a figure decked out in wing collar, grey ascot, cutaway coat, striped trousers, spats, and upon his head a dark fedora set at a discreet angle.

Contemplating this figure, a stranger might surmise that here was a man of fashion, a dilettante, whose delicate hands touched nothing of the earth earthy, and who had uttered his early cries within the confines of a dainty cradle in a foreign city--Rome, Paris, or Teheran--attended by servants who responded at once to his most inarticulate wish.

Our stranger, however, would have been wrong on all counts: no dilettante, but a good solid scholar of French literature, whose publications, while not frequent, were important and well-received; no aesthete, but a man who could grub in the garden, hike twenty miles a day with the Adirondack Mountain Glub, dance until the wee hours of the morning, and put together an excellent and tasty Irish stew.

If he looked a man of fashion, as he did on this particular Saturday afternoon, he was on his way no doubt, as indeed he was, to afternoon tea at the home of a colleague. And, alas, no--neither Rome, nor Paris, nor Teheran, not even New York, is to be honored as the birthplace of John Richardson Miller, but Leominster, Massachusetts, a mill town half way between Worcester and the New Hampshire border where Miller père for half a century cared for the sick, brought innumerable people into the world and eased as many out of it.

John Miller's childhood and youth are outside the pale of our knowledge. For all we know, he may have been a barefoot boy with cheeks of tan who went fishing on a summer's day, a bamboo pole over his shoulder and a can of worms in his hand.

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We do know that in the fall of 1909 John Miller entered Williams College and that he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in June, 1913; and that he remained another year at Williams serving as an assistant in history and taking a Master of Arts degree.

In this era of non-early specialization, John Miller became an instructor in French, Latin, and algebra, at the Penn-Yan Academy in central New York near the head of Keuka Lake.

The following year he moved on to the Washington University

Academy in St. Louis, thence to West Virginia University where he taught the Romance languages--French and Spanish--until 1929.

In the meantime, he had obtained a Ph.D. at Harvard and studied at the Sorbonne, the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, the University of Florence, the Middlebury French School, and the Institut de Phonétique in Paris. Mr. Miller also held in 1920-1921 a Parker Traveling Fellowship from Harvard for research at the Bibliotheque Nationale. '

In the fall of 1930, John Miller and his wife joined Vassar's French Department. Mrs. Miller was the former Maria Tastevin whom Mr. Miller had first met at a meeting of the Modern Language Association. Forsaking the cause of learning momentarily, John Miller and Maria Tastevin adjourned to a nearby drugstore where, over a couple of banana-splits, the courtship really began. In due course they were married and shortly thereafter, with Mrs. Miller, who was returning to Vassar College, where she had taught from 1922 to 1928, he found his way to Poughkeepsie.

John Miller's major publication was a 626-page book published by the Johns Hopkins Press in 1942: *Boileau en France au dix-huitieme siecle*. This work was very favorably reviewed in American, French, and English journals. All the reviewers, without exception, referred to this volume as an extremely valuable reference work for students of the 18th Century. Following the publication of this book, Mr. Miller was invited at the suggestion of Henri Peyre of Yale to become a collaborator with A. F. B. Clark on the Boileau section of *A Critical Bibliography of French Literature*.

In March 1946 Mr. Miller published in collaboration with Eliot G. Fay a highly-regarded eleven-page critical bibliography of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

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In November of the same year, Mr. Miller published a successful educational edition of Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*. This charming tale of the encounter of a wrecked aviator and a little boy from another planet is widely used in the United States, not only as a first reading text, but as an example of a literary type in contemporary literature.

The Millers' last years at Vassar were darkened by the death of their only child, Madeleine, a beautiful and talented young woman who, after graduating from Vassar, had married a Frenchman and lived in Paris. There was joy for them, however, in the presence of a grandchild.

Mr. Miller, at that time Chairman of the French Department, retired in 1955 and with Mrs. Miller left the United States for their home in Paris. John Miller was always the most hospitable of men; still, in the midst of an active social life and a frequent attendance at the Paris theaters, John Miller continued his scholarly work. In 1959, there appeared

his educational edition of Paul Vialar's *Le Petit Garçon de l'ascenseur*. This unusual fantasy and Mr. Miller's excellent introduction commended itself to teachers of French in this country. It is still a widely used text.

Only once after his retirement did Mr. Miller return to the United States. In 1963 he attended the 50th reunion of his class at Williams. When he came to Poughkeepsie for a few days, we saw him at various parties, gay, happy, full of boyish spontaneity, and glad to be back among his old friends. At one party, he appeared in his reunion costume--an outlandishly colored blazer and on his head, not a fedora, but a beanie.

Summer after summer in France, research leaves in France, a French wife, and a daughter married to a Frenchman, could not make a Frenchman out of the boy from Leominster, Massachusetts. There was a facade, to be sure--he spoke French with the best of Frenchmen and he adapted well to life in France--but underneath the facade there was the New Englander. He loved France but he had great pride in his New England background. With Daniel Webster he could have said: "I shall enter on no encomium upon Massachusetts; she needs none. There she is. Behold her, and judge for yourselves."

John Miller died in Paris on January 27, 1966, at the age of seventy-five.

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