

WALTER sworm

1917 -1959

Walter Stone, Associate Professor of English at Vassar College, died in London on March 11, 1959. in his forty-second year. Upon this occasion we are paying tribute to a gifted teacher, scholar, and writer, whom we shall long remember and whose death we shall long mourn.

Walter Stone was born in St. Cloud, Minnesota, on August 4, 1917. He was educated at the University of Illinois, taking the degree of B. A. with highest tutorial honors in 1939, and going on to the M. A. at the same university in 1941. After working for a time for the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, he went into the United States Navy and served from 1942 to 1945, including a tour of duty in the Aleutian Islands. In 1944, he married Ruth Perkins, who was later to receive considerable recognition for her poetry.

When the war ended, he entered the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University. Remaining in residence at Harvard until 1950, he took a master's degree in 1949 and his Ph.D. in 1953. His doctoral thesis, which he wrote chiefly under the direction of the late Professor Hyder Rollins, was a study of the literature of Elizabethan eschatology, in particular a cluster of predictions pointing to the end of the world in the 1580's. This thesis opened the way to the larger study of Renaissance apocalyptic and eschatological thinking on which he was doing research in England at the time of his death. He had hoped to write the first book on the subject. His researches had already led to the publication, in the Journal of English and Germanic Philology, for 1953, of "Shakespeare and the Sad Augurs", an article which proves that a recent well-known attempt to date Shakespeare's sonnets has been based on radical misinterpretation of available evidence. By its extensive learning and its sound arguments, the article quite transcends its limited subject and stands as an important contribution to the study of eschatology in the Renaissance.

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It was at Harvard that he began his career as a teacher, serving as a Teaching Fellow, on the staff of "English A", from 1946 to 1950. In 1950 he returned to the University of Illinois as an Instructor in English. In 1953 he came to Vassar College as an Assistant Professor of English, and in 1953 he was promoted to Associate Professor.

Among the courses which he taught here were senior composition and poetry from Blake to Keats. In 1958 he also received a Faculty Fellowship. It is impossible to exaggerate how much this award meant to him, for it enabled him to go to England, which up until that time he had known only through the literature which he loved so well.

So far this has been an account of Walter Stone's life as a scholar and teacher. He was also a writer. For years he wrote poetry and fiction, and at the time of his death his talent was beginning to win recognition. One sign of this recognition will be the inclusion of some of his poems in Poets of Today VI, to be published this year by Scribner's. In 1958 one of his short stories, "Reason Not the Need", appeared in the New Yorker, and an article, "The Mezzanine", in the Partisan Review. "The Mezzanine" is a witty satire on the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association. But Walter Stone, like other people endowed with a strong sense of irony, could be satirical about things of which he was very fond, and he spent some of his happiest hours at such meetings, for they gave him an opportunity to meet so many of his old friends.

Among his gifts, his talent for friendship is one of the more notable. People of all kinds were easily drawn toward him, and, after they had come to know him, felt that here was someone with a special quality, here was someone unique. It is not easy to define this quality. Some things about him are very clear. He was gentle and warm-hearted and generous, quick to sympathize, and completely open in his manner. He was one of the most pleasant of companions, lively, witty, full of intellectual curiosity, full of interesting ideas -- and always kind.

But there is something else that is harder to describe and perhaps even more central to his nature. There is a tradition that St. Francis once found a piece of paper

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on a muddy reed and picked it up and cleaned it off out of reverence for the "word" that was written on it. Not many people, in this day or that, can either feel or understand such a reverence for words, but Walter Stone did. Words were not merely the instruments of his trade as a teacher of literature and writer: they illumined the world and lighted up human experience which without them would be brutish and opaque, and it was Walter Stone's sense of this numinous quality of the word that inspired his deep love for, and absolute dedication to, literature»

Even more remarkable was the un-derivative and, in

the best sense of the word, naive character of this devotion. He was a learned man, and his mind was thoroughly steeped in the literary and scholarly traditions of England and Western Europe, but literature for him was never just a learned enthusiasm or sophisticated hobby. It was his primary response to life. It was the deepest expression, perhaps, of that extraordinary vitality that moved out from him in so many directions and took so many forms, in all of which one sensed a deep love of the world as well as an acute sensitivity to the pain and mystery and beauty with which it is filled. Walter Stone was in fact, that very rare thing, a natively American literary mind as naturally and unselfconsciously at home in the atmosphere of the imagination as the fabulists and poets of the older literary cultures, yet happily free from any tinge or a compulsive or restricting "nativism". His true and great vocation was that of the poet, and he served it well. The record of this vocation remains not only in his writings but in the minds of many of the students for whom his teaching opened doors upon literature and the world; The following words were written by one of his former students shortly after Walter Stone died, and it is fitting that they should be recorded

Mr. Stone conveyed his own feeling for life, and literature as an expression of the greatness of life to all his students. He left us with a wonderful, magical sense of the immediacy of people and places. Through the
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works of other poets and writers, he gave us a very special world. To those of us who had him for our central courses, he held out a kind of poetic vision and offered us a part.

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