In Memoriam

Milton Miller
Professor of English, Emeritus
UC Riverside
March 3, 1918 - March 25, 2009

Professor Emeritus Milton Miller came to UCR during its first year as a college of the University of California. He was one of a small group of forty-one adventurous faculty and seventy-five students who had been given the idealistic mission of setting the tone for a small and intense liberal arts campus. As a member of the English Program, Milton engaged himself with the other Humanities Division colleagues in the exciting but time-consuming task of creating and teaching a two-year core course. The program they developed was so rigorous and so successful that a higher percentage of UCR students went on to graduate schools than from any other public institution of its time. Frank Bidart, one of the nation’s leading poets and a student of Milton’s, has said UCR was so hard in those days that everything in his life since has seemed easy by comparison.

Milton Miller was the image of a teacher in the humanities and was thus an ideal fit for such a program. He was trained as a scholar at the University of Wisconsin; his teaching skills were sharpened as a junior faculty member at U.C. Berkeley; and his life was broadened by his Army service in military government during World War II and by his experience as a labor organizer among Southern sharecroppers. This background, combined with his sensitivity as a poet, his warm sense of humor, and his broad humanity, made him immediately the most popular teacher in his department and in 1973 won him the campus Distinguished Teaching Award. At the presentation, the Chancellor quoted one student who wrote, “He taught me what it means to be a human being.” During those early years he also published a series of scrupulously argued articles in prestigious academic journals on subjects ranging from John Milton to T. S. Eliot.

In 1960 U.C. Riverside radically altered its mission, adding Ph.D. programs and placing an increased emphasis on scholarship. Milton Miller responded to this change by becoming as effective and as popular a teacher of graduate students as he had been of undergraduates. Although the English Department was especially rich in his specialty, he directed more than his share of dissertations. As Graduate Advisor in the early 1970s he worked with colleagues and students to create a radically new graduate program, which is, in essence, the program still in force. Late in his career he served twice as Department Chair, fostering many important changes, especially in the Composition Program, whose task, he always insisted, was and is to teach writing as a form of complex thinking. Moreover, he
dedicated himself to restoring the idealism and commitment to undergraduate teaching which had first characterized UCR.

During two momentous years, Milton served as a visiting professor at other universities. In 1967-68, he was a visiting professor at Brown University. In 1988 Milton served as a visiting professor at Xiamen University, thus fulfilling a dream of visiting China, which had begun in his youth when he read Malraux’s *Man’s Fate*. Several other sabbaticals took him to England. He returned from each journey with new insights and a deeper wisdom to share with students and colleagues. Milton had a gift for Socratic conversation, which served in the classroom to bring everyone into the dialogue, whether he or she at first wanted to be. Many students have written over the years of the atmosphere of community or “happening” which characterized his classes and of how he introduced them to the value and excitement of the intellectual life. This same gift for the Socratic conversation was the basis of his many friendships around the world.

From the beginning Milton had taken a special interest in creative writing, fostering productive, informal writing groups and helping to establish a student literary magazine, *Mosaic*, which survives to the present. Milton believed that ideas were poetry and that a poem was an idea. A number of well-published writers have recognized the important influence of this conviction on the development of their minds. One of them, who became a world famous poet, says that his career began when he took Milton Miller’s course on John Milton. Another student, who published significant Christian poetry, credited Milton Miller, a Jewish professor, with teaching her most of what she knew about the intellectual content of Christianity. When it became clear that the English Department, because of the necessities of a growing graduate program, could no longer afford to offer more than a token number of courses in poetry and fiction, Milton established the first free-standing Creative Writing Program in the University of California system. It was taught by lecturers and by faculty from various departments, whom Milton had encouraged to shift a portion of their own appointments into the new program. He helped to establish a Creative Writing major with no connection to the English Department and eventually to create a full-fledged undergraduate and graduate department with a faculty of its own.

After retirement and until his final illness, Milton maintained a strong interest in the new Creative Writing Department, attending its meetings and advising as to policies and appointments. It was a source of pride and pleasure for him to watch his creation grow into a solid element of the UCR community, one which has gained national and international recognition. During these years he wrote some of his own finest poetry and a play, *A Comedy of Everyday Life*, which was produced on campus and in the place of his birth, New York City.

Here is a passage from “Mountain Landscapes, Mainly Chinese,” one of his late poems:
ordinary days achieve
the ascent of ordinary landscapes:
  each leaf and tree resting effortlessly in itself
  the way revealing wonders so various and ordinary
  that ascent is not a conquest but a
  fascination with the fullness of what’s there
  and quietly attained
  every step discovering sufficiency and ease
  and every step an end within itself

Milton Miller died March 24, 2009 at the age of ninety-two. Well over a hundred friends, many of them former students, attended his memorial service. He is survived by his wife, Darline, his five children, his four grandchildren, his great-grandchild, and by countless friends and students, who will never forget his amazing humanity and irrepressible vitality.

Edwin Eigner
John Ganim
Hart Schmidt