

Emory Elliott

Professor of English and University Professor

UC Riverside

1943-2009

Emory Elliott, Professor of English at Riverside, and University Professor of the University of California, died on March 31, 2009, shortly after returning from a lecture tour in China, where he served as Guest Professor at the University of Beijing, an honor extended to few international scholars. At the time of his unexpected and premature death, Emory was one of the leading figures in the world in the study of American literature, and widely acknowledged internationally as the unofficial ambassador of the field. His encouragement of younger students and faculty here and abroad was legendary, and he was a beloved mentor to several generations of scholars, particularly women and people of color who were often among the first in their families to enter the profession.

He joined the Department of English at UCR in 1989 as a holder of a President's Chair after teaching at Princeton University, where he also served as department head. His decision to leave Princeton was considered significant enough that it was reported in the *New York Times*. It is a credit to the University of California and to the Riverside campus that his qualities were immediately recognized and rewarded. In 1995, he was awarded the Distinguished Teaching Award of the Riverside Division of the Academic Senate. Shortly after, he was appointed as Director of the Center for Ideas and Society, the Riverside Humanities Center, transforming both the Center and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences in so doing. In 2001, he was appointed a University Professor of the University of California, one of only 36 in its history, and only one of three in the field of literature.

Emory was the author of three books that achieved the status of classics in the field and editor of several large collaborative projects that involved nearly all the leading Americanists of our era. His *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (1975), published by Princeton University Press, studied changes in

sermons in Colonial New England as the seventeenth century advanced. He analyzed the rhetoric of Puritan sermons, finding that the images of generational conflict, which predominate in the sermons of second-generation ministers, speak to the psychological needs of both the ministers and their congregation. The book is still a mainstay of research and teaching in departments of English and History and American Studies, as well as theological seminaries.

Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810 (1986), published by Oxford University Press, studied the writing of four eighteenth-century American writers. In moving to the eighteenth from the seventeenth century as his subject, Eliot focuses attention on a group of understudied imaginative writers such as Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow, Philip Freneau and Charles Brockden Brown. He showed how these writers assumed the roles of truth tellers and spokesmen previously played by the clergy and how they adapted this role to fit their own sense of cultural marginality. The book remains one of the most respected in the field and inspired a generation of dissertations and follow-up studies. His *New England Puritan Literature*, which first appeared in the Cambridge History of American Literature, is known as the most coherent and frequently cited study of its subject.

In addition to his book-length studies, Emory published innumerable articles and scholarly reviews. Furthermore, he was one of the most active and respected leaders of editorial teams in the profession. As General Editor of Oxford's American Literature series, he provided introductions to scores of American novels. *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* and *The Columbia History of the American Novel* are known and used by every serious scholar of American literary history, but they also foregrounded the mosaic of diversity and conflict that produced our literature. A conference he arranged at Riverside entitled Aesthetics and Difference produced volumes, including *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, published by Oxford, that challenged the separation of the aesthetic and the social and political. He edited the *New Essays on the American Novel* series for Cambridge University Press and the *Penn Studies on Contemporary American Fiction* for the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Reviewers and colleagues often noted Emory's leadership in the field, even when they acknowledged the controversies generated by his attention to previously overlooked peoples and writers. He was a leader of the field of American literary study who "asked questions about who and what makes up a fundamental American literature." As one of the "shakers and movers" in the profession, he engaged others in dialogue about what "terms like 'American' and 'literature' might mean." He was "known throughout the world as an Ambassador of the new American Studies." In many parts of the world, especially Latin America, Europe and Asia, "the name 'Emory Elliott' is synonymous with American Studies." Appointments and elections to various posts reflected this general sense of his centrality, most notably his term as President of the American Studies Association. He was the U.S. Delegate in literature to Oxford University Press, a member of the Editorial Board of *PMLA*, the journal of record in literary study in America, as well as presiding officer of the American literature branch of the association. He was called upon by dozens of universities around the country for advice in revamping their curriculum and as a chief scholar in his field for the United States Information Agency, he spoke to audiences around the world on American literature and culture and its study. He was a central figure in the famous Salzburg Seminars, devoted to understanding intercultural literature around the world, and events at Salzburg in 2010 will be devoted to Emory's memory. Even in the last few years, his schedule of lectures reads like a map of the globe: Beijing, Rio, Laussane, Vienna, Sussex, Warsaw, Bucharest, Moscow, Bologna, Paris, Genoa, Florence, Seville, Delhi and more. One of the most cherished keynotes of his career was his term as President of the American Studies Association, and in his Presidential Address, he pointedly highlighted the work and inspiration of the African American scholar Nellie McKay, the French scholar Viola Sachs, who had been a refugee in the New World, and the German scholar Winfried Fluck. Emory concluded with a call to an American Studies that would engage with the world at large: "For a nation as self-satisfied and self-isolating as the United States, the need to humbly seek and carefully consider outside perspectives and criticism is essential to the future of the country and its citizens. As Americanists, we need to listen and really hear all voices and make

greater efforts to engage with colleagues from around the world, not only to share our knowledge of the United States but to learn other ways of perceiving, thinking, and behaving in the world.”

Emory was also a campus and university leader. As chair of the Committee on Educational Policy, and then of the University Committee on Educational Policy and as chair of the Committee on Academic Personnel, he introduced innovations that have remained an important part of our policies and procedures. At Princeton and at the University of California, he was an adviser to presidents and chancellors, and had the ear of the highest level of the administration, an access which he used wisely and well. A hidden aspect of his legacy was that he was an institutional builder, not as a Chair of a Department, or as Dean, Provost, or even Chancellor (all of positions he either occupied or could have), but as a builder behind the scenes who made certain that the necessary building blocks of the University’s future would be in place. Many careers and departments exist today in large part because of his tireless advocacy.

In his synoptic histories of American literature, Emory Elliott has been one of the leaders in helping us to understand how American literature is profoundly shaped not only by its traditions and its immediate social setting, but in the urgent ways in which it speaks to our own moment and helps us imagine our future. Perhaps nowhere else is this contribution so cherished as in his legendary teaching and mentorship. In his moving and inspiring teaching, he led several generations to understand how they could shape that future through an understanding of that literature. At the University of California and at Princeton, and at the United States Military Academy at West Point before that, he took his place as one of the greatest teachers in the history of these institutions. One student memorably wrote, “he gives me hope,” a sentiment Emory must have cherished. His mentoring of women and minority faculty and graduate students here and across the country has been of great importance both on a personal and institutional level and has fostered a spirit of openness and fairness that has been a model for his colleagues.

Yet the Emory that many students will remember will be an almost motivational figure, speaking to them on the first day of class of his own hopes and fears, of how and why he came to be doing what he did, and how, as the child of a working class family in which he was the first to attend college, what he had to overcome to do it. Emory loved the dynamism and diversity of the Riverside campus, as well as its many challenges and opportunities. Emory was born in Baltimore on Oct. 30, 1942, and grew up in a working-class neighborhood. His father was a truck driver who never attended high school, and his mother operated a loom in a factory. Emory was the first in his family to receive a college degree, earning a bachelor's in English at Loyola College in Baltimore. He went on to earn his master's degree, also in English, at Bowling Green State University and his doctorate at the University of Illinois.

Emory embodied the very definition of the title that he held: "The title University Professor is reserved for scholars of international distinction who are recognized and respected as teachers of exceptional ability." Most importantly, however, he will be remembered by all who knew him as a human being, as a father, as a husband and as a friend. He is survived by his wife, Georgia Elliott, the associate vice chancellor for development at UC Riverside; their five children, Scott, Mark, Matt and Laura and Connie; and their grandchildren.

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S. G. Axelrod

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