



Obituary

Born: Monday, January 9, 1922

Died: Tuesday, April 28, 2015

Lewis Edward Nicholson, a well known figure in mediaeval and Anglo-Saxon studies and a member of the emeritus faculty at the University of Notre Dame, died on April 28, 2015 in South Bend, Indiana. He was 93 years old.

Dr. Nicholson served on the faculty at the University of Notre Dame from 1958 through 2000. His professional activities centered around the classroom, where he taught courses ranging from Beowulf, Chaucer, and Middle English metrical romance to classes on the Gothic language and Old Norse, as well as advanced seminars on the Anglo-Saxon Exeter Book, Vercelli Book, and Junius Manuscript. He was a member of the Medieval Academy of America and International Society of Anglo-Saxonists. As the Old English specialist, he directed several dissertations, sat on many boards, and always taught a freshman seminar class out of his belief in establishing good writing habits early in a student's career. He always exhorted his students about the importance of perspective: "Pay attention to point of view!" He insisted that students consider the voice of the storyteller before coming to conclusions about the meaning of a work, and believed that Anglo Saxon poets treated point of view with as much care as modern writers, like a Henry James or a T.S. Eliot.

Nicholson is best known for his publications on Anglo Saxon poetry and especially on Beowulf. He came to literary studies an enthusiastic student of the oral formulaic and performance theories as developed by Parry and Lord in the 1930's, and later adopted by his dissertation director at Harvard, Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr. After rigorous study and research, however, Nicholson came to understand that the poetry of Old English possesses an artistry that is much more literary and monkish than popular and meadhall-ish. Whereas his first major study *Oral Techniques in the Composition of Expanded Anglo-Saxon Verses* (1958) reflects his earlier interest in oral poetry, later works, such as the monographs "The Literal Meaning and Symbolic Structure of Beowulf" (*Classica et Mediaevalia*, 1964), and "Beowulf and the Pagan Cult of the Stag" (*Studi Medievali*, 1986) demonstrate how he was heavily influenced in later life by the exegetical approach put forth most notably by Robert E. Kaske and D.W. Robertson Jr. Both his *Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (1963) and his festschrift with colleague Dolores Warwick Frese, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard* (1975) also feature many articles examining the rich allusiveness and antithetical style of many Old English poems. T. A. Shippey, reviewing *Essays in Appreciation* in *TLS* on 5 February 1977, writes as follows: "[This] impressively lavish book" responds "to all of the major and most of the minor poems in the Anglo-Saxon canon." Shippey suggests a motto for this book's essay

Service Summary

Memorial Mass

3:30 PM Thu May 07, 2015

Basilica of the Sacred Heart

Campus of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN 46556

collection, a motto found in a set of words once used by George Hickes: “elegantia, splendor, et proprietas.” Shippey concludes, “No one is likely to complain of this long overdue farewell to embarrassment in Anglo-Saxon studies.”

Nicholson often complained that the tendency in Anglo-Saxon studies was to approach the poetry as historical and philological documents rather than as literary works with literary sensibilities and devices. He would say that philological research is always basic but insisted that the Anglo-Saxon scholar ought to use such information to explore the literary qualities of each poem. His article “The Art of Interlace in Beowulf” (1980) shows how repetition and variation create theme and weave motifs throughout the poem. Other pieces, such as “Hunlafing and the Point of the Sword” (1975) and “The Literary Implications of Initial Unstable H in Beowulf” (1984), illustrate his belief that research should be joined with literary examination.

Nicholson was known at Notre Dame for his high standards. Former student and professor of Old English at the University of Mississippi, J. R. Hall, had this to say about Nicholson: “Professor Nicholson was a most learned and demanding teacher. He did not settle for a student's second best. He obliged us to reach beyond our grasp. He expanded my capacity as a scholar. I was always pleased when he approved of something I published.” Of Nicholson's careful attention to manuscript readings with emendations allowed only as a matter of last resort, former student Jean Anne Strebinger reflects: “Professor Nicholson, in the course of his long life, has been influenced by almost every critical approach of his day, extending from the Parry and Lord oral formulaic approach to the exegetical approach of Robertson and Kaske, but who can ever forget his essay ‘Hunlafing and the Point of the Sword’ where he calls upon the scholarly community to consider once again the century-old practice of writing ‘Unferth’ for ‘Hunferth’? In class as well as in this essay, he convincingly demonstrated a clear literary need for re-evaluating Rieger's famous 1872 emendation of writing ‘Unferth’ for the manuscript's ‘Hunferth.’ Recent studies show, more and more, a return to the scholarly practice of the manuscript reading.”

The eldest of four children, Lewis Edward Nicholson, son of Russell Presnall Nicholson and Mary Mildred Killam Nicholson, was born January 9, 1922 on the family farm near Hopkins in northwest Missouri. He received his grade school education at Xenia, a one room country school house, attended Pickering High School for one year, and later Hopkins High School, where he graduated with honors in 1940. He always wanted to learn Latin, Shakespeare, and the classics, but as the eldest son of a successful farmer, he was expected to focus his interests on agriculture. Persistent about his passion for culture and the arts, however, he studied drama and literature in high school whenever he could. Perhaps the high point of his high school career came during his junior year at Hopkins when he played the role of Everyman in the mediaeval morality play, *The Summoning*

of Everyman, a play directed by drama teacher Ruth Bradfield. With Josephine Dillon as judge, the production received high ranking in the state drama competition at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Additional state awards followed the next year, with Lawrence Carra as judge, when Nicholson played the 15th century French lyrical poet Francois Villon.

After one year at the Northwest Missouri State Teachers College, he went to the University of Iowa, arriving on the Iowa campus at a time when the renowned director Edward C. Mabie was making national news with his theater productions in the new Rockefeller Theatre. World War II was soon to interrupt his studies, and he, like many of his generation, volunteered and entered into service with the Army in May 1943. In the South Pacific, he served in the intelligence branch of the army and was assigned duty at the Bureau de censure alliée, a subdivision of the Office of Chief Base Censor, SOPAC BACOM, in Noumea, New Caledonia. During his three year tour of duty, he continued to develop his current interest in native linguistic traditions, primarily oral. Near the end of the war, when he was on leave in Rotorua and Whakarewarewa, New Zealand, he had the good fortune to meet the famous Rangī, the cultural head, or “guide” as she called herself, of the Maori peoples. In response to his interest in performing arts, she invited him to dinner at her house, where she told him about her peoples’ oral tales and traditions, and showed him some traditional costumes and artifacts, even an ancient ship.

Nicholson eventually left service in January 1946 to return to his college studies at Iowa. He changed his major to English literature and language and studied mediaeval literature under Professor John C. McGalliard, one of the giants in Anglo-Saxon studies at the time. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, there at Iowa, he earned a B.A. and then an M.A. in English, writing his thesis on Chaucer’s translation of the Roman de la Rose, a task that required him to learn Old French. This ambitious endeavor brought him distinction at Iowa and opened the way to attend Harvard University, where he earned a second masters’ degree and a Ph.D. At Harvard, he was privileged to meet and to study under such distinguished scholars as Douglas Bush, George Sherburn, Walter Jackson Bate, Hyder E. Rollins and Herschel Baker. F.N. Robinson was actually one of his examiners at his Ph.D. oral defense. Nicholson would on occasion remember the long afternoon seminars at Harvard with Taylor Starck reading the Nibelungenlied or Louis Solano the chivalric romances of Chretien de Troyes and then ask himself, why do anything else the rest of my life? Nicholson gained valuable teaching experience first at Ohio State and then as teaching fellow at Harvard, followed by a three-year stint teaching linguistics at the University of Michigan. He spent the body of his career at the University of Notre Dame, with a one-year absence as visiting lecturer at the University of Illinois in Urbana.

Of his other academic interests, first and foremost was a love of all things theatrical: drama and the opera, particularly

Mozart and Wagner. Nicholson spared little expense traveling in the U.S. and abroad to Europe to attend concerts and plays and to see art and architecture. He especially enjoyed touring English country houses and mediaeval castles there and in Europe. Peering out from under his English cap and poking about with his eighteenth century walking stick, Nicholson, liked to spend his free time attending book fairs and collecting antiques. He was fortunate to turn this passion for the books and art of bygone eras into a part-time job after retirement when the dean appointed him to serve as the university's expert in collecting rare books and manuscripts for the Hesburgh Library's mediaeval initiative. One of his last scholarly endeavors was to edit a collection of translations of the Vercelli Book homilies, translations prepared by his graduate students in a graduate seminar on the work. This volume of the Vercelli Book homilies, *Translations from the Anglo-Saxon* (1990), offers the reader the only complete modern English translation of all twenty-three Vercelli Book homilies. Nicholson is survived by his sisters Neola A. Stringer and Irma M. Zapf, and by his brother Herbert Walter Nicholson, all still residing in Maryville, Missouri.

A Memorial Funeral Mass will be celebrated at 3:30 p.m. Thursday, May 7th in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, University of Notre Dame. Burial will take place at Cedar Grove Cemetery, Notre Dame, IN. Welsheimer Family Funeral Home is assisting with arrangements. Family and friends may leave e-mail condolences at www.welsheimer.com.