



# The William Meredith Foundation

*"And the great sloth heart will move."*

---

Biography excerpted from *The William Meredith Foundation website* ([www.http://williammeredithfoundation.org](http://williammeredithfoundation.org))

## MEREDITH, Jr., William Morris

### Memorial Minute: William Meredith

By Janet Gezari

William Morris Meredith was born in New York City on January 9, 1919 and died on May 30, 2007 at Lawrence & Memorial Hospital after an illness of some weeks. He received a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Partial Accounts: New and Selected Poems*, a National Book Award in 1997 for *Effort at Speech: New and Selected Poems*, and many other awards, including fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations. He was a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a position re-titled Poet Laureate in 1985. He published nine volumes of poetry as well as *Shelley: Selected Poems*, *Poets of Bulgaria*, and *Alcools*, poems by Guillaume Apollinaire that he translated.

William earned his BA at Princeton University in 1940, where he followed his father and grandfather. He wrote his senior thesis on Robert Frost, who was a lasting influence on his poems and, later, a friend. Our library has a copy of the senior thesis, *An Analysis of the Poetic Method of Robert Frost*, inscribed by Frost, with gratitude, in 1940. The inscription suggests that Frost hadn't read the thesis and also says why: "I am assured on the best authority his results are very good. No man is supposed to look at himself in the glass except to shave." This was a view with which William would have concurred: "Study something deeper than yourselves" is how he puts it in one of his own poems.

After Princeton, William worked briefly for *The New York Times* (some of the obituaries said as a reporter, but I always understood he was a copy boy) before enlisting in the U. S. Army, and then the Navy, where he served as a pilot, making night landings on the decks of carriers. He re-enlisted for the Korean War, achieved the rank of Lieutenant Commander, and was awarded two Air Medals. His formally precocious first book of poems, *Love Letter from an Impossible Land* was selected by Archibald MacLeish for the Yale Series of Younger Poets and published in 1944. Between active service in the Pacific and Korea, he did graduate work and taught English as a Woodrow Wilson fellow at Princeton and at the University of Hawaii. At Princeton, he met and became close friends with Charles Shain, who was also doing graduate work in English there. Much later, when Rosemary Park was due to retire here, William lured Charlie to Connecticut College, where he served as President from 1962 to 1974.

William began teaching at Connecticut College in 1955. In the mid 1960s, when Upward Bound programs were a fresh idea, he founded and taught in the college's first enrichment program for low-income inner city high school students. He taught until his retirement in 1983, after a stroke that immobilized him for two years and left him with lasting expressive aphasia. It was difficult for those of us who knew him well to fix the boundaries between what he understood and what he could say, although it often appeared that his apprehension of the world remained full and satisfying, and that only his capacity to articulate it was affected. I can remember afternoons in Uncasville, in the early years after the stroke, when I and several of my colleagues took turns reading poetry to William and helping him with the exercises in the speech manuals provided for his rehabilitation. If I missed a word in a poem or put the stress in the wrong place, he would stop me; meanwhile, the manuals had him reciting simple commands using the smallest number of linguistic units. The irony of his situation did not escape his notice, but it never diminished his resolve. Those who knew him after the stroke will remember his courage in the face of obstacles and his optimism about his progress. During this time and until his death, William was loved and cared for by his partner, the poet and fiction writer Richard Harteis.

Only those who knew William before the stroke know the magnitude of his loss, and ours. William was consummately articulate, and his conversation was one of the highest pleasures of his company. His letters, typed on his old manual machine if he was at home or handwritten if he was traveling, spoke about cadged meals, boozy evenings with friends, and the cornus alternifolia (or alternate-leafed dogwood) he thought you ought to have in your garden. He told wonderful stories and liked elaborate jokes. He was effortlessly and often savagely witty. His judgment of language was impeccable and accounts in part for his centrality to what was then the world of American poetry. William knew all the poets, and several of his more celebrated contemporaries—Robert Penn Warren, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell—relied on his responses to their poems and drafts of poems.

While he was here, William saw to it that poetry was a part of life at Connecticut College. In addition to the writers I've just mentioned, Derek Walcott, Thom Gunn, Muriel Rukeyser, Eudora Welty, Maxine Kumin, Richard Wilbur, and Robert Frost all came to New London to give readings. Afterwards, there were long dinners in Uncasville where conversation flowed as generously as the drinks did. William was most his own strange self when he was hosting one of these dinners. He believed that food was meant to be served, and served with love. He wasn't particular about what we ate but he was very particular about how we did it. Stacking the dishes when you helped to clear the table was never permitted. During the thirteen years I was William's colleague, I don't remember his taking a sabbatical, but when he did take time away to teach at Carnegie Mellon or to perform his duties at the Library of Congress, he would produce his substitute. I remember all of these replacements well because they made extraordinary contributions to the life of the English department and the college. Blanche Boyd was one; the others were a former student and widely published writer of historical fiction, Cecilia Holland; the distinguished poet Robert Hayden, who had been the first black poet to serve as Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress; the playwright Romulus Linney; and the Pulitzer Prize winning short story writer, James Alan MacPherson.

It was a mark of William's humility that his own poetry readings always combined a few of his poems with a larger number of poems written by other poets. He had no truck with grade inflation, and he used a teacher's shorthand when he described himself as a B+ poet who had written a few A plus poems. In the eulogy he gave at William's funeral, Michael Collier, William's former student and now a poet and teacher of poetry at the University of Maryland, reminded us that William used to say that he was proud of only three things: his knowledge of prosody, his knowledge of trees, and his immunity to poison ivy. His knowledge of prosody and trees was immense, as was his knowledge of many other things human and natural. He knew, for example, a lot about music, and had been opera critic for the Hudson Review, but he wore his knowledge lightly. He was always more interested in what you could tell him than in what he could tell you.

No one could have fought harder against death than William did, and this was entirely consistent with the life he had led and the poems he had written. He felt himself bound to continue, whether he was flying a mission for the Navy or composing a sestina. He feared cowardice more than other terrors, but he also felt grateful for the beauty of the universe and never stopped being conscious of its particular kindness to him. A poem titled "John and Anne" takes John Berryman's words about Anne Frank as its epigraph: "the hardest challenge, let's say, that a person can face without defeat is the best for him." Just outside the door to William's house in Uncasville, there was a tamarack tree that had been savagely cropped by an oil truck. He liked to point out that the accident had made the tree thrive as it never could have otherwise.

William Meredith was the least suicidal poet of his generation. His last book of new poems, published a few years before his stroke, was titled *The Cheer*, an improbable title for any poet but William. The first poem in the book, a kind of envoi, goes like this:

"Frankly, I'd like to make you smile  
Words addressing evil won't turn evil back  
but they can give us heart.  
The cheer is hidden in right words."

By cheer William means morale or confidence or, better still, courage, with its etymological connections to heart. He wanted us to be heartened, even though—or perhaps because—we live in "a culture in late imperial decline." *The Cheer*, written during the Vietnam war, includes a poem in which the poet presents himself as a "mild-spoken citizen" and respectfully accuses his country's president of "criminal folly." "A man's mistakes," the poem slyly notes, "his worst acts, / aren't out of character, as he'd like to think." *The Cheer* includes several elegies, wry and celebratory poems written in memory of Lowell, Hemingway, Plath, and Berryman. All of them except Lowell, who tried to kill himself more than once, succeeded in ending their own lives. William dreamed and imagined death

over and over. The elegy had been an important kind of poem for him since "The Wreck of the Thresher," which he wrote to commemorate "a squad of brave men" who died at sea in 1963. If his career as a wartime pilot, someone who faced death down daily, provides one important context for his struggle to survive after his stroke, the too short lives of the poets he loved, past and present, provide the other.

In "Talking Back (To W. H. Auden)," William rejects Auden's idea (in his elegy for W. B. Yeats) that "poetry makes nothing happen." "What it makes happen is small things," his poem says. William's highest aspiration as a poet was always spiritual, but he was never solemn. He agreed with Frost that "all the fun's in how you say a thing." His most memorable poems enable us to see the most forgettable things newly and to be changed by what we've seen. In one of Tom Stoppard's plays, there's a sentence honoring the effort at speech that defined William's life: "If you get the right [words] in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak for you when you're dead."