

MEREDITH, Jr., William Morris

1919–2007

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William Meredith was born in New York City on January 9, 1919. He attended the Lenox School in Massachusetts and in 1940 graduated from Princeton University with an AB in English, Magna Cum Laude. His senior thesis was on the work of Robert Frost, a major influence for Meredith throughout his career.

He worked briefly as a reporter for *The New York Times* before joining the U.S. Army Air Force in 1941. In 1942 he served as a carrier pilot for the U.S. Navy, achieving the rank of lieutenant. During his service, Meredith's first book of poems, *Love Letter from an Impossible Land* (Yale University Press, 1944), was chosen by Archibald MacLeish for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. For the next few years he taught English at Princeton University as Woodrow Wilson Fellow in Writing and Resident Fellow in Creative Writing while still in the U.S. Navy Reserves.

In 1948, his second collection, *Ships and Other Figures* (Princeton University Press) was published. Meredith then taught briefly as associate professor of

English at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu before returning to the Navy as a pilot in the Korean War. During his service, he achieved the rank of Lieutenant Commander and received two Air Medals.

During this time, Meredith continued to focus on his poetry, and for several years after his return to the States, he divided his time between teaching and writing. An opera critic, dramatist, translator, editor, and public servant, Meredith was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1964.

Meredith's later books of poetry include *Effort at Speech: New and Selected Poems* (TriQuarterly Books, 1997), for which he won the National Book Award; *Partial Accounts: New and Selected Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), which won both the Los Angeles Times Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize; *The Cheer* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1980); *Hazard, the Painter* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); and *Earth Walk: New and Selected Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

Meredith also edited *Poets of Bulgaria* (Unicorn Press, 1986) and *Shelley: Selected Poems* (1962), and translated *Alcools: Poems 1989-1913* by Guillaume Apollinaire (Doubleday, 1964). A selection of William Meredith's prose, including memoirs, critical essays, reviews, and an interview, has been published as *Poems Are Hard to Read* (University of Michigan Press, 1991).

According to the poet Edward Hirsch, "[Meredith] has looked generously and hard at our common human world. He doesn't slight the disastrous, the 'umpteenth kinds of trouble' he has seen—accountability weighs heavily in his poems—but his work reverberates with old-fashioned terms such as fairness, morale, cheerfulness, joy and happiness."

Meredith's honors include the Loines Award and a grant from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize, the International Vaptsarov Prize in Poetry, a grant and senior fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and two Rockefeller Foundation grants. He was a Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1978 to 1980 and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1963 until 1987.

Meredith began to suffer from expressive aphasia after a stroke in 1983. This means that he lost the ability to express himself at will. As the poet Michael Collier writes in his foreword to Meredith's book *Effort at Speech: New and Selected Poems*: "Trapped, as it were, inside his body, which has profoundly betrayed him, for the past decade and a half Meredith has remained occupied with the poet's struggle—the struggle to speak."

For several years, Meredith divided his time between Uncasville, Connecticut, and Bulgaria, where he was granted honorary citizenship, with Richard Harteis, by decree of President Zhelev in 1996.

Meredith died on May 30, 2007, at the age of eighty-eight, at Lawrence and Memorial Hospital in New London, Connecticut.