

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION**MERRITT EUGENE LAWLIS****(November 22, 1918 – March 9, 2014)**

Gene Lawlis grew up in Columbus, Indiana, and Indianapolis. He graduated in 1936 from Arsenal Tech in Indianapolis, where he was editor of the school paper and won the James Whitcomb Riley medal as an outstanding student of literature. He went on to Wabash College, again serving as editor of the campus newspaper and graduating with distinction in 1940. After graduation he hitchhiked to Arizona, took jobs as an embalmer's assistant in a funeral home and as a salesperson in a clothing store while he waited for an opening on a newspaper in Phoenix. When it came, he worked as a proofreader and reporter, and occasionally as a movie reviewer.

Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into the war were still nearly a year away. But the war was clearly imminent, the draft was in place, and in the spring of 1941, to assure his choice of service, Gene volunteered for the Army Air Corps. He was sent to flight school, trained as a navigator, commissioned as an officer, and until near the end of 1944 served stateside as an instructor in aerial navigation. Then he was assigned as a navigator in a B-52 bomber squadron stationed in the Philippines whose missions were to bomb Japanese shipping in the China Sea. On his third mission, in April 1945, his plane was shot down and, one of three survivors, he was rescued from the sea by the Japanese and became a prisoner of war on an island off the coast of China.

Gene has written of his experience as a prisoner in *Winking at Death: Memoir of a World War II POW* (2008). In the most dramatic of several episodes in which Gene confronted death, the commander of the prison camp had him brought to a courtyard, ordered him to kneel and bend his head, and placed the blade of a samurai sword on his neck. Then without a word the commander sheathed his sword and walked away. "Later it occurred to me," Gene writes, that the commander "seemed to be waiting for me to show obvious symptoms of fear – begging for mercy, blubbing, crying out, shaking all over. My conclusion, then and now, is that a kind of intuition saved me. I felt that I had to do exactly what he ordered... and give the *appearance* of being calm and unafraid, which I was sure he, and the samurais he admired, expected of anyone, especially at the point of death" (pp. 113-114).

After the end of the war and his release from captivity, Gene was sent to recuperate in military hospitals, including one in Indianapolis, where he met "the love of my life," Naomi Abel, an Army nurse. They were married in 1946. By that time Gene had begun graduate study in English at Harvard, and he and Naomi lived in Cambridge while he finished his study of the literature of the English Renaissance, especially its drama and prose fiction. In 1951 he came back to Indiana as a faculty member in the Department of English in Bloomington.

The principal interests of Gene Lawlis' literary study were the history, craft, and social and moral meanings of prose fiction. He wrote his dissertation and his first book on the fiction of the Elizabethan writer Thomas Deloney, *Apologist for the Middle Class* (1960). The next year he edited a collection of Deloney's short novels which one reviewer judged "the most important contribution to this year's work

on Elizabethan prose.” He then put together an extremely useful collection of fiction by seven Elizabethan writers (1967), and edited an edition of a play by Thomas Dekker (1979). In 1965-66 he held both a Mellon fellowship to study and teach at the University of Pittsburgh and a Folger Library fellowship to study Shakespeare and other Elizabethan writers in Washington DC. In his courses, conversation, and public lectures (at one time or another he lectured on each of the university’s campuses as well as to national gatherings of scholars) he moved along a broad range of fiction writers: Boccaccio and Cervantes, whom he studied on sabbaticals in Italy and Spain; Austen and Hemingway, whose writing he greatly admired; Swift, Tolstoy, Joyce, and Shakespeare as a playwright, storyteller, and appropriator of other writers’ fictions. In his last graduate seminar before his retirement in 1983 he moved toward his own memoir about his war service by enrolling students, some of them veterans of combat, in studies of the practices and moral and political themes of the literature of the Vietnam War.

Professor Lawlis, as he became upon his first promotion from the rank of lecturer in 1954, was from the beginning to the end of his career recognized as an alert, generous, and thoroughly informed teacher who was quick to respond to the requirements of his students’ learning. In 1955-56 he was awarded the Brown Derby, an honor bestowed by undergraduate students, and he was again chosen by students to receive an Outstanding Faculty Award in 1984. He taught undergraduate and graduate courses in both the Department of English and the Department of Comparative Literature, usually on the writing and history of the English and European Renaissance (Shakespeare, Elizabethan prose, Rabelais and Cervantes, Petrarch and Machiavelli). He also consistently taught introductory courses on writing and literary understanding, the reading of fiction, and undergraduate honors seminars. (He noted in an annual report in 1964 that in the past five years he had taught seventeen different courses.) Students remarked on his “thorough knowledge,” his “patience and kindness,” his unflinching custom of treating “students’ ideas with respect.” A student in one of his graduate seminars, who judged the course the best he had taken in the Department of English, wrote that Professor Lawlis had broken from the pattern of having students read papers at one another but instead had created “a community of people working out similar problems in a similar language.” The associate instructors who taught with him praised him as a “terrific adviser” for their own teaching, a mentor who fostered a “spirit of partnership” in their work together. He “greatly stressed the welfare of individual students,” and he was always attentive to what students needed and ready to adapt the emphases and tactics of the course to meet these needs. He was the director of a couple dozen doctoral dissertations, served on the committees of many others, and was known for the “uncommon skill” with which he conducted oral examinations of masters and doctoral students.

The qualities that made Gene Lawlis a good teacher also made him a good colleague. He cared about the institutional structures in which members of the faculty and staff worked and in which students learned. He helped to establish an undergraduate honors program in the Department of English, directed a campus orientation program for international students, and conducted a summer seminar (Cervantes to Joyce) for teachers in other colleges. Because of his knowledge of the campus and his quiet authority he was elected to the advisory committee of the Department of English, to the College Policy Committee, to the Bloomington Faculty Council, and to the presidencies of the local chapter of the AAUP and of the Language Club; this last named group was in the middle decades of the last century

an important locus for discussion among faculty members and graduate students in the several departments of literary study. He served as acting chair of the Department of Comparative Literature and as director of the program in Renaissance Studies.

In a tribute upon the occasion of Professor Lawlis' retirement, William Burgan of the Department of English wrote of him, "The secret of his success as a graduate director has quickly become apparent to any colleague who has ever asked his opinion of a piece of writing or an idea. He is not the most easily persuaded of critics, but he is the most attentive: with his retirement the English faculty may have lost its best listener." Those sentences perfectly capture the character and worth of Gene Lawlis' long tenure in the university. I remember conversations with him which sooner or later came to some version of the question, "Read any good books lately?" The question was not a test but an invitation. Gene conducted his life with the steadiness which had once saved it, and he stayed open to all the learning and pleasure that his students, his colleagues, and books themselves could give him.

I request that this memorial resolution be presented in the Bloomington Faculty Council and become part of its minutes and archive, and that after its presentation a copy be sent to Naomi Lawlis.

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