

Baxter L. Hathaway

December 11, 1909 — March 29, 1984

In 1946, when he was thirty-six, Baxter Hathaway left the security of an associate professorship at the University of Montana to accept the risks of an untenured assistant professorship at Cornell and the challenge of developing a creative writing program within the English department. By the fall term of the following year, the new program had been approved and instituted; the series of courses that Baxter taught or supervised in 1947 still constitute, both in philosophy and structure, the undergraduate creative writing program. A nationally distributed magazine of new fiction and verse was such a key element in Baxter's plans that he and his wife, Sherry, and other members of the Cornell community launched the magazine with their own money and kept it going with various fund-raising events.

During his early years at Cornell, Baxter had to struggle against pedagogical resistance to creative writing courses within the department. At one point, in 1953, the popular success of the writing courses brought a reaction that threatened the program's very existence. In that year, the program, with only one member of the faculty (Baxter himself) with a rank above instructor, attracted half of the major students in the English department. Ultimately the problem—Baxter referred to it as “a bad situation all around”—was resolved through curricular reform and a general strengthening of staff. When Baxter retired from teaching in 1976, he left to the University the legacy of a nationally respected writing program, composed of undergraduate seminars in the sophomore, junior, and senior years and a graduate component leading to the M.F.A. degree, as well as *Epoch*, a magazine recognized by editors of the annual prize anthologies and readers of contemporary literature for its ability to discover talented new writers and for the general quality of its contents.

Soon after his retirement from Cornell, Baxter, always an innovator, began a new career as publisher, editor, and indeed as printer; he and Sherry established Ithaca House, a venture in publishing and in exhibiting and selling paintings and other works of art. Like *Epoch* and the creative writing courses at Cornell, Ithaca House quickly became an important means for the encouragement of talent in the visual arts as well as in the fields of poetry and fiction. In addition, Baxter for several years edited *The Cornell Review*, a quarterly of essays and creative work published by the College of Arts and Sciences. The editorial offices were on the second floor of the Ithaca House quarters on Plain Street, in downtown Ithaca, and he divided his time among the flatbed press and fonts of type in the basement, his desk in a corner of the gallery on the first floor, and *The Cornell Review* offices on the floor above.

Devoted for nearly four decades to the written work of others (at Montana he had taught creative writing and been in charge of the composition courses), Baxter still managed to engage in research that resulted in significant contributions to scholarship, for the energizing tension between scholarly or critical endeavor and creative writing that came to characterize the Cornell English department was part of his own nature. His published works include *A Transformational Syntax* (1967), a study of the grammar of modern American English; and *The Age of Criticism* (1962), a major investigation of sixteenth-century Italian philosophers and literary theorists who were influential in later critical discourse. He also wrote a rhetoric and experimental grammar, *Writing Mature Prose* (1951), and he edited, among other volumes, two books of stories written by Cornell students and a selection of stories from the first fifty issues of *Epoch*, published in 1966 under the title *Stories from Epoch*. Although his support of emerging writers and his study of critics of the past often took precedence over his own creative interests (in 1936, as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, he won Hopwood awards in both fiction and poetry; the novel that won the fiction award, *The Stubborn Way*, was published the following year), Baxter wrote poems for most of his life without striving much for their publication. A small selection of them, *The Petulant Children*, appeared in 1978.

Whatever his achievements, Baxter seemed to have an eternity of time at his disposal; always he was ready to go off to the Straight, to the Johnny Parsons Club, to Noyes Lodge, and later to the Temple of Zeus for a cup of coffee, to talk about serious and frivolous matters with students and colleagues. He delighted in taking an opposing position in such talks, simply for the sake of the argument. At the weekly *Epoch* editorial sessions, Baxter had the patience to consider the value of a metaphor in a poem or the dimension of a character in a story until the subject was properly disposed of. *Carpe diem* sentiments never had applicability to Baxter; for him, life seemed to flow on forever—which must have meant that on some level the extinguishing of his own life was something he didn't fear. Meanwhile—and here's the miracle—he not only wrote his books and poems, fought for his program, edited manuscripts, talked at length with students in conferences, prepared his lectures, and attended nearly every reading given by Cornell students and visiting poets, but had time left over for some fancy humming or for looking at birds and other aspects of the natural world that delighted him.

In an issue of the *Ithaca Times* published shortly before Baxter's death and largely devoted to his life and accomplishments, A. R. Ammons, a longtime member of the Cornell writing staff, gives a succinct description of what the founder of the program was like:

*Baxter named his own way in the title of his early novel **The Stubborn Way**. If conviction, persistence, determination, and courage are the good sides of stubbornness, then Baxter was commendably stubborn and faithful in his work at Cornell. Carrying on many pursuits at once—teaching, writing, editing—he fashioned a creative writing program much ahead of its time and one of the models for the creative writing courses now offered in almost every English department in the country. But programs as such were not Baxter’s chief end: programs were for him instruments by which to announce values that he admired in persons. These values he found in mastery of knowledge, flexibility of thought, innovative dissent, and any changing that seeks out and defines what endures.*

Baxter is survived by his wife, one daughter, two sons, an elder brother, and nine grandchildren. We want them all to know that we, too, miss him deeply.

James McConkey, Walter Slatoff, Scott Elledge