

Robert Thomas Farrell

November 16, 1938 — July 31, 2003

Bob Farrell, Professor of English, died in his sleep of congestive heart failure on July 31, 2003. He had been through extended and complex back surgery, and was in great pain much of the time, but he died as he would have wished, while teaching summer school and looking forward to Chaucer in the fall. Teaching was what kept him going, and we can be glad he did not have to endure the slow wasting that retirement would have meant.

Bob was born on November 16, 1938 in Bronx, New York, the son of Raymond and Gertrude Klesius Farrell. His mother died when he was eight, and from his early teens he bore an adult's share of responsibility for managing the household and contributing to its support. Endowed with a wonderful voice, he put himself through college as a professional singer, and might well have made a career as a singer had he so chosen. Many Cornellians will remember his performances with the Cornell Savoyards during the 1980s as Grand Duke Rudolph, Sir Joseph Porter, William Shadbolt, Ruthven Murgatroyd, the Pirate King, and Lord Mountarrarat, as well as his "Morning Performance" series of Renaissance concerts in the 1970s and 1980s.

Bob received his B.A. degree at Fordham in 1960, and his Ph.D. degree, also at Fordham, in 1967. The later stages of his graduate career were spent at Merton College, Oxford, where he studied with J.R.R. Tolkien, tutored undergraduates, and formed a deep attachment to the British Isles. In 1967, he accepted an assistant professorship at Cornell, where he spent his entire academic career. His courses ranged from Anglo-Saxon literature and culture to the Vikings, Chaucer, and medieval archaeology, which became the chief scholarly interest of his later years.

For Bob, to take up a role or an activity was to realize its essence. It was the secret of his best teaching: "He speaks like Chaucer!" his students wrote, "He *is* Chaucer!" "He not only taught us Anglo-Saxon, he immersed us in it," and he did so indeed, with powerful recitations of the great poems, Anglo-Saxon feasts, and slides which enabled him to dwell in loving detail on the wonders of Anglo-Saxon jewelry and stone work. And the same imaginative energy informed his scholarship. A colleague, Gary Rendsburg, writing about biblical narrative, quotes from Bob's monograph *Beowulf, Swedes and Geats*:

Beowulf is a work of heroic history. . . . A poet writing in this mode does not disregard absolute historical fact, history, that is, as we know it. He rather sees it as less important than other considerations His work will be a freely woven structure in which the characters and actions of the past will be part of an ethically satisfying narrative.

As Professor Rendsburg observes, the narrators of the Torah exercised the same heroic licence. Bob believed in the value of this kind of heroic history with all his heart, the heroic licence of the heroic poet.

Much of Bob's scholarly work is largely unknown in America, grounded as it was in on-site work in Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia. He was a pioneer in underwater archeology, and an instrumental organizer and networker, perhaps most of all as leader of extensive and significantly innovative investigations of the many "turf islands" in Irish freshwater lakes. His work is held in very high esteem among European archeologists, and a volume of studies in his honor is in progress. The same genius for innovation informed Bob's work as a teacher of basic skills. Here again, he was a pioneer. His insight into the potential value of the word-processor as a teaching device grew into an active interest in the teaching of writing, and eventually led to his laying the foundations of what is now a nationally recognized undergraduate writing program.

Many at Cornell who have no interest in medieval studies will remember Bob as a cook of legendary prowess and a host without peer, unstinting in the bounty of his hospitality, his love of feasting in all its aspects. But it was perhaps students who came to know most fully the many forms his generosity could take—class parties, of course, and countless informal sessions of noshing and conversation in his wonderfully open office, but also mentoring of a special kind. Some of Bob's closest relationships were with students whom he saw to be lonely, isolated, and adrift in the sea of Cornell. They would become family, free to make Bob's house theirs, and to socialize on an equal footing with his friends and colleagues. He made several crucial interventions in the lives of students who had been lured into deep water by drugs, alcohol, or emotional problems, but whose problems somehow seemed to be the official responsibility of no college office. Bob would work tirelessly to ensure that the problem was clearly and unavoidably recognized, that the appropriate specialist care was made available, that parents were notified and, no less important, that the student knew that somebody was actively concerned about him or her in their crisis.

Bob never forgot his own early exposure to loneliness, poverty, family alcoholism and his own chronic physical disabilities. The same courage that permitted him to overcome these things, and to preserve his sense of humor right up to the end, also enabled him to sense and respond to other people's trouble with an unflinching directness and sympathy such as seen in very few people. That same generosity went out to family—his aunts, uncles, cousins, his brother and his family—a number of whom went through hard times. Bob was always available to them, had rich, often hilarious, redeeming memories of them, and gave them the kind of warmth that he himself had not known after his mother's death.

Bob is survived by his beloved wife, Shari, and by his daughters, Eva and Erica, and there are many others, locally and all around the world, who feel that with his passing they have lost not just a friend, but another father or brother.

Frederick Ahl, Andrew Galloway, Winthrop Wetherbee