

# William Merritt Sale, Jr.

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William Merritt Sale, Jr., was born the son of a bank teller in Louisville, Kentucky, and attended public school there. He entered the University of Virginia in 1917, enlisted in the Army in 1918, and in 1919 enrolled in the University of Wisconsin, where he became editor of *The Daily Cardinal* was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and was graduated *summa cum laude*. After taking a Master of Arts degree in English at Harvard in 1923, he taught English for two years at the Bernt School in the Philippines. In 1925 he entered Yale Graduate School. He wrote his thesis under the direction of Chauncey Brewster Tinker, whose standards of scholarship he especially admired, and who (Sale once said) convinced him that he had made the right choice of a life. In 1929 he married Helen Stearns, a fellow graduate student in English. In 1930 he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree, and for the next six years he served as an instructor at Yale.

Sale came to Cornell as an assistant professor in 1936. At the end of his first year he was made assistant chairman, and for most of his career at Cornell when he was not in the chair he was the strongest of the powers behind it. He was named Goldwin Smith Professor of English in 1959, and in 1968, upon retirement, he was made professor emeritus.

Sale was an authority on the life and works of Samuel Richardson, and his *Samuel Richardson: A Bibliographical Record* (1936) and *Samuel Richardson, Master Printer* (1950) will not soon be superseded. His occasional critical essays and special lectures (on Shakespeare, Upton Sinclair, Edith Wharton, John Marquand, et al.) were always elegant and original. But it was as a teacher that he made his greatest contribution—in his courses in fiction and literary criticism and in his sections of Freshman Composition. Many Cornellians remember the excitement of his lectures on the novel from Fielding to Joyce. In 1940, almost alone in the department in his interest in modern fiction, he offered a course that included Thomas Mann and Sigrid Undset, along with Hardy, Conrad, and Flaubert. To read fiction under his guidance was to discover ways of seeing, hearing, thinking, and talking that did more than simply illuminate a particular work. Good novels well read intensify one's sense of life, and clarify and focus one's vision of it—of people and societies, of manners and cultures. Sale left his mark on many who later became professional students of literature or writers of fiction.

Fascinated by the art of writing, he was also blessed with the knack of teaching it. Many Cornellians who were not primarily interested in the study of literature learned to write in one of his sections of Freshman Composition, a

course which he taught with great pleasure for most of his career. These students characteristically learned more than the syllabus promised: they discovered the moral implications of style and came to understand the ugliness of cant and jargon; they learned to test skeptically the clichés (ancient and modern) of the discourse of politics as well as of literary criticism.

As a teacher of the theory of “practical criticism,” Sale played an important part in the history of the English Department. In a way, he succeeded Frederick Prescott, and for a short but important period he was the Cornell authority on modern critical trends. He brought to the department and its graduate students a new “New Criticism” from the works of I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, and to his undergraduate teaching the most liberating aspects of the theory and method of Brooks and Warren. Never a zealot, he nonetheless took a line, and his lively and genial advocacy of it sharpened through many years the perceptions (and wits) of his colleagues and students.

By the natural ascendancy of his intellect, by his passion for perfection, by his devotion to his ideals of professional excellence, William Sale managed, during thirty-two years at Cornell, to exert an extraordinary influence on the shape and direction of the Department of English. In debates on appointments, curriculum, and academic standards, his judgments usually prevailed.

Beyond the walls of Cornell, the society of his family, the bounds of his garden, and the realms of sport—particularly, baseball—Sale’s chief interest was the English Composition Test of the College Entrance Examination Board. He was chief reader of that test for sixteen years during the period when the number of students taking “the Boards” increased tenfold, and the task of grading the tests required 150 school and college teachers of English to be brought together annually from all over the United States for a week’s work at Princeton. During the first two days of each session Sale persuaded this heterogeneous group of teachers to look beyond the easily recognized errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar to discover evidence of the writer’s power to use English effectively—to find the right word, to choose the right idiom, to intuit the right syntax; in short, he taught teachers how to recognize in student writing better evidence of aptitude and achievement than the examples of faulty usage stressed by tradition. As chief reader for CEEB, Sale influenced the teaching of English composition in America out of all proportion to the size and frequency of the annual reading sessions at Princeton. As chief examiner, moreover, he was equally influential, for by changing the form of the test to improve its validity and the reliability of the reading, he also changed the emphases in writing courses.

Though Sale enjoyed the challenge of inventing tests that would be fair to all concerned, and the challenge of convincing his readers about how to grade them, he was always a skeptic about examinations—particularly in

writing and in literature. Yet he worked enthusiastically for the CEEB, partly because he believed that selective admission to college should be based on aptitude and achievement and not on social or racial evidence. He rejoiced that the board made it hard for admissions officers to admit a student from a posh prep school with scores in the 500s at the same time that they rejected a girl from Brooklyn or a boy from Louisville with scores in the 700s.

During the last three years of his life Sale lived at Ithacare. He endured the sorrow of separation from his wife, who lived in a nursing home, the victim of premature senility, and he bore cheerfully the miseries of his own poor health. He dressed for dinner in an oxford-cloth shirt with a button-down collar from Lewton's, one of his many rep silk ties from the Yale Coop, and a tweed jacket from Langrock's in Princeton. He watched the news and sports on TV, read detective stories at a brisk clip, and enjoyed occasional visits with old friends. Till he fell into a mortal coma, his mind was as quick as life and his humor was rich, ironic, and witty. He was a proud man with a fearsome temper; but he was also an extraordinarily honest and clear-sighted man with great self-discipline.

He is survived by his wife, Helen, and by their three sons: William, professor of Classics and chairman of the Department of Comparative Literature at Washington University; Roger, Professor of English at the University of Washington; and Kirkpatrick, a journalist and free-lance writer.

*Anthony Caputi, James O. Mahoney, Scott Elledge*